The Beautiful Room Is Empty Study Guide

The Beautiful Room Is Empty by Edmund White

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Plot Summary

This novel is the story of a young gay man's coming-of-age in 1950's and 60's America, and in particular of his struggles to both suppress his sexual orientation and establish his career as a writer. While vividly detailing the specific circumstances and manifestations of that struggle, the narrative's central thematic concerns are universal such as the coming of age, the search for self-identity in the face of powerful societal pressure to conform, and the experience of being an outsider.

The first-person narrator begins his story with descriptions of his life at an upper middle class preparatory school and how he escaped its rules and constrictions, portrayed as extensions of those imposed by American society in general and his mid-Western parents in particular, to explore life as seen and lived by students at the art college across the way. He befriends several of its students, including the outspoken and bisexual Maria, with whom he quickly becomes particularly close despite his already present awareness that, in many areas of his life, he is an "outsider." Through Maria, he has his first encounter with a long-established homosexual couple, lesbians, Betts and Buddy, whom he and Maria view as living a foolish parody of heterosexual "normality." At the same time, the narrator also develops friendships with a male homosexual bookstore owner, Tex, who initiates him into physical sexuality.

After graduating from prep school, the narrator attends college, where he engages in increasingly frequent promiscuous sex, while working with an eccentric therapist on "curing" his homosexuality. His relationship with Maria continues, albeit at a distance, and he finds himself increasingly drawn to people who have detached themselves from parentally-imposed restrictions and who live with a kind of freedom he says he is desperate to realize for himself. Meanwhile, he is slowly coming to understand how emotionally empty and unsatisfying his promiscuity actually is, but is unable to stop.

In the summer between his first and second years of college, the narrator moves into his mother's Chicago apartment while she is in Europe. While there, he develops a relationship with Lou, a successful advertising executive who lives in the same building. Over time, Lou challenges various aspects of the narrator's self image as a writer, a man, and a homosexual. The narrator initially reacts negatively to those challenges, but after a while accepts Lou's guidance while, at the same time, becoming aware of Lou's human frailties.

After a few months, the narrator's mother returns, is informed of what her son has been doing, and immediately takes him to task for both acting on his inclinations and not working closely enough with his therapist. While the narrator agrees that she is right about his therapist, he also realizes he does not want to change as much as he thought he did, and that he does not believe the change his mother wants is either possible or desirable. So he stops working with the therapist and almost immediately enters into a relationship with a young man named Sean, who turns out to be almost as troubled by his orientation as the narrator is and who is eventually driven to end the relationship and moves back home. This, combined with other sobering and traumatic experiences,

leads the narrator to once again consider entering into heterosexual marriage with Maria. He decides not to follow through, however, when he learns that Lou's similar attempt at marriage has failed drastically.

One night, drowning their sorrows in booze at a gay bar, the narrator and Lou are shocked when police officers conduct a raid. The bar's patrons, however, having had enough of the sort of societal oppression represented and practiced by the police, fight back. The narrator and Lou watch, simultaneously bemused and excited at what they see. The next morning however, they are not surprised to see that there is no mention in the newspapers of an event that they see as a profound expression of freedom and rebellion.

Prologue, Chapter 1

Prologue, Chapter 1 Summary

This novel is the story of a young gay man's coming-of-age in 1950's and 60's America, and in particular of his struggles to both suppress his sexual orientation and establish his career as a writer. While vividly detailing the specific circumstances and manifestations of that struggle, the narrative's central thematic concerns are universal such as coming of age, the search for self-identity in the face of powerful societal pressure to conform, and the experience of being an outsider.

The narrative begins with quotes from novelists Anatole France and Franz Kafka. The France quote likens pity to sensuality, while the Kafka quote refers to how people often do the same as other people without thinking of their own reasons for doing what they do and how the actions of one can trigger instantaneous, thoughtless reactions in the other. He likens the experience to two people being in a room, neither of whom is able to separate his or her identity and beliefs from the other and who, as the result of one leaving the room, are both outside its doors."

The narrator describes, in often poetic detail, his experiences at Eton prep school and specifically, his experiences when he crossed the street and spent time at the art academy. He describes spending time with the artists there, including the jovial Ivan and the more withdrawn Paul and how his experiences at the academy gave him an awareness of both pretension and passion. He comments on describes his admiration for the emotional, spiritual and intellectual independence of the art students, so different from the Midwest conservative nature of his home and family in mid-1950's America. He hints at his slowly emerging homosexuality at his growing sense that he is an outsider to his life and family and at his simultaneously emerging sense that as such, he is desperate for some kind, any kind of approval.

Throughout the chapter, the narrator describes in considerable detail his relationship with Maria, another student at the school whose passionate socialism is, for him, a powerful trigger for his desire to connect on a more honest level with other human beings. He describes his habit of spending large amounts of time with her, of entering into intense intellectual discussions, and of simultaneously challenging and supporting each others' impressions of literature, philosophy, and life in general. He comments on how became a good friend and companion to Maria and her boyfriend (in much the same way as, he adds, he became a good friend to many couples), but never entered into any kind of sexually intimate relationship with her. She, on the other hand, seems to enjoy his Midwestern innocence and desperate desire to belong. "...I liked everyone so much and entered into everything so readily," the narrator comments, "that [for Maria] life became more exciting around me." She introduces him to the joys of eating out at diners, calls him on his occasionally pretentions attempts to impress the other artists, and in general introduces him to wider perspectives on life.

The summer after he and Maria meet, the narrator receives permission from his domineering father to visit her at the summer art camp where she's teaching. The narrator describes his pleasure at riding the train, their journey through nearby woods, his formal dress contrasted with her casualness, and his joy at both being with her and having a sense of freedom. He goes for a walk in the night and for the first time, the night is a reminder not that he is alone, but that he is encompassed and cared for. The chapter concludes with narrative commentary on an elderly lesbian couple, Betts and Buddy, "who lived in the most remote cabin" at the camp. The narrator describes Maria's somewhat patronizing commentary on their relationship, but then ends his description with her suggestion that it's "bizarre we find their marriage charming but we can't endure the heterosexual original they're aping." The narrator comments that he accepted every "wrenching of convention" offered by Maria, and stayed with her as she wandered restlessly through both her artwork and her thoughts. One night, she drives him into a nearby town, where they slow dance at a country bar and Maria comments that she loves country music. "With her," the narrator suggests, "even loss sounded as glamorous as gain."

Prologue, Chapter 1 Analysis

The book takes its title, and ultimately its central thematic perspective, from the Kafka quote in the prologue with the reference to the beautiful room being empty. Essentially, the quote speaks of an individual's inability to appreciate himself and his life for themselves, sacrificing self-awareness and personal integrity in the name of basing attitude and action on the attitude and actions of others. This is the essential situation of the narrator throughout the book, as he tends to define himself by what circumstances dictate rather than by a sense of personal truth which is, admittedly, a mystery to him. All he knows, all he has, all he feels is that he wants experiences that society and circumstances seem to define as unsuitable. The journey of transformation he undertakes over the course of the novel, however, takes him into a greater and evolving awareness that he can be who he is and who he wants to be without having to be restricted and/or defined by outside determinations.

It's important to note that the seeds of that awareness are already planted by the time the novel begins. The narrator knows he wants a more emotionally stimulating existence than that practiced by his parents, knows he has homosexually-oriented sexual desires, and knows that he has an artistic, creative sensibility, none of which are "acceptable" or "normal" in the time and place in which he lives. He also knows that, as he himself suggests, that he is desperate for approval of any kind, a core component of the sexual promiscuity which tends to define his life and behavior throughout the narrative. If he is considered sexual desirable, he is approved of, at least on some level. In any case, the plot of the novel, such as it is defined by the incremental steps taken by the narrator as those seeds begin to grow into fully realized states of identity.

Other than the seeds mentioned above, there are several other important elements introduced in this section that play important roles later in the narrative. These include the characters of Paul and Maria. The reference to Betts and Buddy, meanwhile,

functions on two levels. The first is as a trigger for revealing just how shallow and self-centered the narrator is at this stage of his life and as a foreshadowing of the eventual deaths of the two women, in physical circumstances that echo the societal circumstances which they, as lesbians and as women, were forced to endure.

At this point, it's also important to note that in general, the experiences of lesbian women, in terms of both oppression and freedom, are in many ways similar to those of gay men, particularly in terms of secrecy, shame, and the longing for normalcy, less so in terms of promiscuity and ghettoizing. There are, however, two fundamental differences in how the different genders experienced both oppression and struggles for freedom. First, the history of emerging lesbian rights and identity is closely related to the history of feminism, whereas the development history of rights and identity for gay men is almost entirely independent of any other human rights movement. Second, society throughout history has never reacted to female homosexuality with the same sort of visceral outrage and disgust as male homosexuality. The point is not made to suggest that the struggles of lesbian women were less difficult or less intensely motivated. They have, however, had different obstacles to overcome and different venues and arenas for their struggle.

Chapter 2

Chapter 2 Summary

The narrator describes how, while on Christmas vacation during his last year of boarding school, he spent more and more time hanging out at a bookstore run by a masculine Southern gay man named Tex and his more effeminate assistant, Morris. The relationship between Tex and Morris, as the narrator portrays it, is occasionally tense, with Tex having to remind the occasionally flamboyant Morris that he runs a respectable business. The narrator, meanwhile, watches them both and wonders whether he is destined to be the sort of homosexual they are.

At one point, Tex complains to the narrator about his financial situation, referring to himself as the narrator's "mother." He reveals that he is involved with a married man whose wife is aware of the relationship, and exploits Tex's need for secrecy in order to get money from him. Further conversation between Tex and the narrator reveals the author's lack of knowledge about what happens sexually between two men, and that Tex believes that once a man begins acting on his sexual desires for other men, he becomes uninteresting to other homosexuals. Even though he's fearful that Tex is right, the narrator fantasizes about actually becoming sexually involved with him, at one point lying to his mother and saying he's going to a dance when he is, in fact, going to see Tex.

On the train into the city, the narrator catches glimpses of several lives through the un-curtained windows the train passes, wondering about whether it would be possible for him to "marry" another man. At the bookshop, Tex introduces the narrator to a married visitor from New York named Lester who, Tex says, is like all male visitors from the city and likes to spend time with boys when he is away. After Tex hints that Lester might be able to teach him about sex, the narrator follows him around the shop for the rest of the evening. Eventually, though, when Lester invites him back to his hotel room, the narrator refuses, choosing instead to invite himself to Tex's apartment. In spite of being fatigued, Tex agrees, and at the apartment, carefully and after detailed explanations, introduces the narrator to both oral and anal sex. Immediately afterwards, the narrator experiences intense shame and hurries away, swearing to himself that he will never again have sex with another man. On the train home, he again catches window glimpses of life going on as he passes.

Chapter 2 Analysis

In this chapter, the narrator continues his exploration of his sexual identity, experiencing relief that he is not alone in his desires and the simultaneous disgust with what he sees as the only way that identity can be expressed. As his explorations continue, each experience reinforces the narrator's initial beliefs about sexuality. Essentially, these are that sex is necessary but inevitably unsatisfying, that an experience of homosexuality is

almost entirely defined by acts of sex, and that any/all aspects of being homosexual are grounded in and defined by shame.

At this point, as the narrative begins its contemplation of the narrator's coming to terms with his sexual orientation, it's important to note how his personal journey echoes that of gay men in general. Virtually all the narrator's experiences, throughout the narrative in general and in this chapter in particular, represent and evoke the situation of most, if not all, gay men of his era. The secrecy, the shame, the obsessive promiscuity co-existing with the determination to never actually act on sexual desire, the campy mannerisms, the longing for normalcy, and the ghettoizing. All were fundamental aspects of male homosexual expression for decades, if not centuries. In short, the narrator's coming of age is, on an important level, the coming of age of an entire community.

Also in this section, the novel continues its thematic exploration of "outsider-ness" through the description of the narrator's subway ride and specifically, his looking through various windows as his train passes by them. It's important to note that that sense of being outside, of being a watcher and observer, of being excluded, is in many ways a core component of both the narrator's defining characteristics of his homosexuality and his being a writer.

Chapter 3

Chapter 3 Summary

In this chapter, the narrator explores several aspects of his life as a first year student at the University of Michigan. He joins his father's fraternity, "simply to please him", and observes the male bonding that goes on there - the heavy drinking, the girl chasing, the indulgent laziness of many contrasted with the academic diligence of a few. He comments on how his father's knowledge of his sexuality created a bond of hatred and anger not only between the two of them but between his father and mother and juxtaposes these observations with his own judgmental comments on the mannerisms, both academic and personal, of an effeminate black English teacher. He also comments on how he kept the various components of his life separate such as his activities with the fraternity, his sexuality, his psychiatric treatments for that sexuality, and his study of Chinese.

The narrator comments that he wanted to study Chinese because he believed himself to be a Buddhist and also believed that learning the language would help him understand the philosophy more. He describes studying with a rather rigid teacher and, at the same time, finding companionship in a particular pair of students, Betty and Kay, who were able to put aside their parents' desires for them to be doctors and lawyers and embrace their artistic natures. He describes how Kay in particular is something of a free spirit, playing practical jokes on her friends and being both outspoken and direct in her comments on how the narrator behaves. He also describes his encounter with a Chinese woman Kay describes as a princess, and contemplates how compartmentalized the woman's life seems to be, similar to how his life is also compartmentalized with his Chinese friends separate from his fraternity brothers, both separate from his studies and all separate from his sexuality.

The narrator then discusses, in sexually graphic detail, his compulsive "cruising" in the men's washrooms across the university campus, using words phrases and images that border on the ritualistic to describe how men met and sexually serviced each other. He also comments that he wasn't particularly interested in being serviced himself, only in servicing others. Meanwhile, as he spends an evening out with Morris and some of his other flamboyantly effeminate friends, he realizes that simply being who and what they are attracts negative attention from others, and that he is part of that reviled community.

Yet another component of the narrator's exploration of his orientation is his work with psychiatrist Dr. O'Reilly, work that emerges from the narrator's determination to become heterosexual and the eccentric O'Reilly's belief that he is the only person who can cure the narrator. O'Reilly also convinces the narrator that because so much of his life is defined and/or shaped by his feelings about sex (i.e. its homosexual and compulsive natures), he (the narrator) was right to question his perceptions about almost everything. Finally, O'Reilly also introduces the narrator to Annie Schroeder, a fellow patient whom O'Reilly describes as having a monstrously abusive father and somewhat

twisted mother. As he and Annie spend more time together, the narrator hears of the extreme abuses perpetrated on her and her brother by their father.

Chapter 3 Analysis

The first of several noteworthy elements in this chapter is the ironic juxtaposition of the self-indulgent, irresponsible behavior of the apparently heterosexual members of the narrator's fraternity with the narrator's desperate efforts to become heterosexual. The juxtaposition seems to pose an intriguing question. If the behavior of his fraternity brothers is, as the narrator implies, typical of that of the heterosexual male, why on earth does the narrator want to be heterosexual at all? The answer is fairly obvious since at the time, perhaps even today in communities, even irresponsible heterosexuality was better than any kind of homosexuality.

Another important element is the appearance of Betty and Kay who, in their determined freedom from the desires of their parents, serve as a contrast to the narrator's inability to live a similarly free life and an inspiration for him to try to do so. There is also the sense that on some level, the narrator is trying to justify his sexual promiscuity by placing it in exactly that context as an expression of his free spirit. It's clear, however, that his behavior is not the expression of true freedom he seems to want it to be. His shame is still a powerful negative force, and his relationship with O'Reilly clearly indicates that he at least desires to be free of his sexual desires and identity. Other important elements of the relationship between the narrator and O'Reilly include the latter's reinforcement of the narrator's questioning nature and the appearance in the narrator's life of Annie Schroeder, another woman who, like Maria, plays an important role in the development of the narrator's perspectives and attitudes. Meanwhile, the parallels between the narrator's individual experience and those of the gay male community as a whole continue, with the narrator's realization of just how hated he and most gay men are.

Chapter 4

Chapter 4 Summary

The chapter begins and ends with descriptions of the narrator's relationship with Maria. At the beginning of the chapter, he describes visiting with her in Chicago over the Christmas vacation while he's visiting his family. During one conversation, they each reveal to the other that they are homosexual, although Maria adds that she is also attracted to, and able to sexually function with, men. At that point, the narrator believes that he is not at all interested in women. But at the end of the chapter, when Maria comes to visit at the end of the school year and after she has been in the narrator's apartment for a few days, they find themselves experiencing passionate sexual attraction to each other and make love several times. During both visits, the narrator and Maria have intense philosophical discussions, one of which centers around the narrator's belief in Buddhism, and includes Maria's comment on how American life is, essentially, Buddhist.

Between the narration of Maria's visits, the narrator discusses several other relationships, all of which he experiences within the context of his continued studies, his increasing efforts to establish a writing career, and his obsession with anonymous and promiscuous sex. Meanwhile, his relationship with the emotionally unstable Annie continues, marked by their occasional, sometimes playful, often pointed psycho-analysis of each other. At one point, he takes her home to meet his conservative father and socialite step-mother, commenting in narration on how his father approved of her even though, now stricken with bulimia, she vomited into the kitchen sink and plugged it up.

Annie's life, the narrator's life, and their life together become complicated by the flamboyant, self-indulgent presence of William Everett Hunton, a flamboyantly homosexual law student. He experiments, both sexually and romantically, with Annie, damaging her psychologically to the point where she has a serious breakdown and has to be treated by an emergency visit from Dr. O'Reilly. Hunton also makes disparaging comments about the narrator's looks and penis size, making him even more insecure than he already is but not so insecure that he stops having sex in washrooms, or pursuing sexual relations with Mick and Harry. At the end of the chapter, the narrator describes how, at a bachelor's party at the beginning of summer vacation, he meets, and is given information about Hunton by, an older man with the same name. The second Hunton reveals that he paid for the first Hunton to school, but later discovered that the younger man stole his name and several possessions, eventually got involved with "some appalling starved girl" and dropped out of school. As he and the narrator return to the party, the older Hunton comments that the girl is in a mental hospital somewhere. "Oh, American life," he adds, "it's past belief."

Chapter 4 Analysis

An in-depth exploration and/or commentary on Buddhism is a subject for another analysis, but a very basic understanding of its fundamental beliefs and practices is important for gaining insight into the book's narrator, his attitudes and experiences. With that understanding in mind, it's possible to see that the narrator's desire to embrace and practice Buddhism is closely tied to a pair of seemingly paradoxical desires - for sex with men, and for freedom from that desire. What he doesn't seem to realize, however, is that in both cases, desire is triggering a repetitive cycle of continuous suffering where the desire for male sexual communion is triggering shame and desperation, which in turn triggers the desire for heterosexuality, which in turn triggers desperation to live and embrace his true sexual identity.

Another paradox in this chapter is the narrator's unexpected detours into heterosexual activity with both Maria and Annie. It's interesting to note that both these experiences are associated with an emotional relationship or the narrator's open intimacy with Maria, and his mutually needy and/or exploitive flirtations with Annie. It's also interesting to note that in the narrator's discussions of his sexual relations with men, there is little or no reference to any kind of emotional connection other than mutual desire. This, it could be argued, is another manifestation of the narrative's implication of the parallels between the individual experience of the narrator and that of the homosexual male community as a whole for decades, and for the most part, male homosexuality was both practiced and viewed on sexual terms only. Emotion rarely entered into the equation. Meanwhile, another of the narrator's negative views of male homosexuality manifests in the character of William Everett Hunton. Hunton is viewed by the narrator as yet another manifestation of the kind of homosexual he doesn't want to become but, at the same time, feels he will inevitably be - selfish, effeminate, and a user. It's possible, in fact, to see Hunton as an extreme, symbolic manifestation of the narrative's thematic interest in individual identity being defined by external rather than internal factors. Hunton is so desperate for some sense of personal identity that he steals that of others, both literally and metaphorically.

Finally, this chapter is notable for its two references to life in America with Maria's comment that American life is essentially Buddhist, and the elder Hunton's comment about life in America at the end of the chapter.

Chapters 5 and 6

Chapters 5 and 6 Summary

The following summer, the narrator's mother flies to Europe and leaves him the keys to her apartment and enough money to buy groceries, but not enough to really live on. He gets a job loading transport trucks and, as his musculature develops, he starts spending his free time at the beach. There he discovers a group of older gay men who go there regularly and which includes wealthy advertising executive Lou, who happens to live in the same apartment building as his mother and with whom the narrator begins a relationship. As the two spend more time together, the narrator develops a greater sense of the homosexual hierarchy as Lou defines it, discovers that being homosexual isn't automatically an entirely bad thing and is instructed on how to be both a better lover and a better writer. The narrator describes how angry and frustrated he feels at being on the receiving end of Lou's criticism, since he has come to believe both his mother's often-repeated contention that he is a genius and the praise of the undergraduate students to whom he's shown his work.

After narrating Lou's confession of his traumatic family history, the narrator also comments on Lou's deep but limited passion for poetry, his hatred of his homosexuality, and his desire for young lovers. This last, the narrator comes to realize, is what will ultimately preclude them from loving each other. At nineteen, he is too old. Eventually, after Lou loses his job and becomes increasingly unstable, the narrator realizes that he is addicted to heroin, and at one point has to take him to a backroom physician who can once again treat him for the intestinal blockage that results from both his violent past and his addiction. As he watches Lou receive his treatment, the narrator's beliefs about the man and their relationship disappear.

When the narrator's mother returns from her trip, she is told by the doorman of the apartment, who's noticed the frequency and length of the narrator's visits to Lou, about the time the two have been spending together. She confronts the narrator, saying he's wasting his time and energy, commenting that Dr. O'Reilly isn't doing him any good, wondering whether the narrator wants to change as much as he says he does, and suggesting that he look for other forms of treatment. The narrator angrily tells her that yes, he does want to change but then, in narration, reveals that he too believes O'Reilly is no longer helping him, and that he too realizes he's wasting his life. Eventually, he and O'Reilly agree to stop working together. In the meantime, the narrator finds himself unable to stop having sex with men in washrooms, even after the police raid the washrooms on campus and arrest several men. As he comments again on his desperation to be heterosexual, the narrator reveals that art student Paul has killed himself. In the anxious wake of the suicide, the narrator visits Maria, their friendly intimacies leading them, in spite of their both being homosexual, to consider getting married. After his return home, however, the narrator lets his communications with Maria lapse, and she later writes to him with an accusation of rejection, along with news of how intensely she is being courted by a woman.

Chapters 5 and 6 Analysis

Throughout the novel, the narrator's parents are generally portrayed as distant, emotionally uninvolved but at the same time having a significant personal investment in how their son is perceived. Yes, they both express concerns about his happiness, his well being, and his ultimate fulfillment, but the narrator makes it clear that, at least from his perspective, those concerns were all expressed within the context of his living a so-called "normal" life. In other words, their desire for him to live well, not to mention the actions that result from that concern, are all grounded in, and defined by, the idea that heterosexuality and conventional productivity and success are the only way to be "normal." Again, this is a product of the time and place in which the narrator is placed, parental concern in that generation being expressed in the same sort of society-defined conventionalisms as sexuality, creativity, and ambition, all key components of the narrator's emerging identity that he is becoming increasingly desperate to express on his own terms. .

Meanwhile, the narrator's efforts at becoming a writer are beginning to take more focus in his life. Here, it's interesting to note the thematically relevant parallels between his experiences of sexuality and his experiences of being a writer. Specifically, both aspects of his life are defined by what others contend he is and/or make him see himself as. His mother and the undergraduates see him as a genius, therefore he thinks of himself as one. Society sees him as a shameful deviant, therefore he sees himself as one. Lou sees him as disposable, therefore he sees himself as such. At the same time, however, it's becoming clear that even while he is still fundamentally defined by outside perceptions, the narrator is also experiencing increased unease with the life he is being forced to live, actively breaking away from O'Reilly and passively breaking away from Maria.

Finally, there is the suicide of artist Paul, a fellow outsider and "genius," a man whose work, integrity, and independence the narrator had admired and whose death seems to trigger, in him, worry and fear that he too is going to find life in a world that rejects genius unbearable. This drives him to consider the desperate act of marriage, a last ditch effort at showing the world that he is normal. Ultimately, however, and as suggested above, the narrator's effort at "normalcy" is undermined, and ultimately derailed, by his emerging sense of individual truth and identity.

Chapter 7

Chapter 7 Summary

Although he has been accepted into a graduate program at Harvard to study Chinese, on an impulse the narrator follows Lou to New York City, where they both live at the YMCA and search for jobs. Lou is almost immediately successful, finding a well-playing position at an advertising agency. He and the narrator spend their evenings exploring the homosexual activities of the city in the restaurants, the bars, and the street community with the narrator realizing just how many homosexual men there are.

For his part, the narrator eventually finds a job first as a trainee writer on a national magazine, doing odd jobs, occasionally doing some writing, and earning barely enough money to rent a small apartment. He describes how he works during the day and cruises for sex at night, how he gains weight as a result of his poor diet and lack of activity, how he comes to believe he has simultaneously more like his mother and less attractive to men because he is so fat. Almost in rebuttal to this idea, he then describes a sexual encounter he shares with several other men in a subway restroom and how, when he and the other participants emerge onto the street, there is a sense of community among them. He comments on how some of his friends from undergraduate college also moved to New York, and how they spend their times dissecting and discussing their watered-down, idealized versions of socialism. He evades being drafted into the army by confessing to his homosexuality, and for a while has a roommate - a temperamental Russian dancer, who suddenly leaves because he doesn't like how the narrator opens a jar of instant coffee.

At one point, Maria moves to New York from Chicago, her lesbian romance having come to a tormented end but which continues over the phone, with her lover repeatedly calling to ask her to return, and Maria repeatedly telling herself that she has to stay away. The affection and intimacy between Maria and the narrator grows. Their relationship, the narrator suggests, changes depending on where they are. The relationship, the narrator comments, for a while distracted him from his fantasies about actually becoming a woman, the fantasies eventually disappearing completely after he reads the graphic, disturbing journal of a man who had actually had the operation. He refers in passing to how his present self has a clearer sense of identity than his younger self and the ideas of his present self about the relationship between writing and memory.

Later, at the end of the chapter, narration discusses Lou's intense relationship with an androgynous blond named Misty. The narrator describes how the three of them spend time together, including a visit to a gay beach. The chapter concludes with a poetic description of a girl he sees on the subway on the way back from the beach, whose fair hair "transformed [a] solid silver cylinder into goldest filigree."

Chapter 7 Analysis

The first point to note about this chapter is the narrator's growing experience of community, the growing awareness that he is neither alone nor a monster, both fundamental components of growing up gay in America in the 1950's and 60's. In other words, he is becoming both less of an outsider and less defined by external definitions of identity. Here again, there is the sense that the narrator's experience both echoes and manifests the experience of the gay male community as a whole, both "coming of age" in the same way.

A particularly important component of this experience is the group sexual encounter in the public washroom. There are several points to note about this incident. First, there is the way it is narrated. This section is the only occasion in the novel where the narration slips into present tense, giving the encounter a sense of immediacy and intimacy that, in turn, seems to be suggesting an immediacy about the sense of community that it triggers. In other words, the immediacy of the narrative suggests that the act was, for the members of the community being formed, albeit briefly, connected with something other than shame. There is a surge of positive energy here, of power, of emerging confidence, of freedom - unformed and undefined, unfocused and untapped, but the beginnings of something that, it could be argued, builds into the surge of defiance that manifests as resistance to homophobic police brutality in the novel's final chapter. The second point to note about the encounter is how the energy it triggered carries out into the streets. In descriptions of previous encounters, any sexual energy essentially remained confined by the secretive, shame-defined walls within which they took place. Now, it seems, that energy is transcending those walls, moving out into the world. Here again, the energy of defiance seems to foreshadow the explosion of similar energy in the final chapter. There is also an ironic point to note here, in that the encounter foreshadows, and in some ways defines, the story told later by the narrator's boyfriend about witnessing a similar encounter and perceiving the men involved as "subhuman."

In any case, the energy of transformation in the encounter in this section has an ironic echo in the narrator's story of the sex change operation. That transformation, undergone by someone seeking his/her personal truth, awakens in the narrator the realization that his idea of being transformed in a similar way is not, in fact, an idea based in his personal truth. There is a clear symbolic relationship here to the narrator's lingering desire for heterosexuality, also a transformation that he, for some time, believed he wanted but which he is finally coming to realize he neither wants nor will benefit from. These points combine with the narrator's own comments about his deepening insight into his writer identity, and his growing sense of self-awareness and his rejection of his past lack of awareness to suggest that his journey of transformation is well on its way. He is, both consciously and sub-consciously, putting together the pieces of the puzzle of his identity, coming to accept himself and his value, both as a sexual being and as a writer. He is becoming less of an outsider to himself.

Finally, the chapter's thematic emphasis on transformation has a final, poetic echo in the elegantly vivid description of the hair color of the girl on the subway.

Chapters 8 and 9

Chapters 8 and 9 Summary

After a year of living "as a fat man" and becoming more disillusioned with how he is viewed by other men, the narrator loses forty pounds and writes a bad play. "Then," he comments, "he met Sean," a very attractive young man who comes to the apartment looking for the Russian dancer and who, just as he leaves, indicates that he finds the narrator attractive. As they spend time together, the narrator realizes he's falling in love but not entirely sure what he can/should do about it. He comments that the relationship with Sean was developing right around the time that both Marilyn Monroe and John F. Kennedy died, circumstances which seem to contribute to his overall uncertainty about the relationship. One night, after Sean prepares dinner and the narrator watches him, trying to rein in his fantasies about their life together, they finally make love, the narrator commenting on the intensity of his happiness. They spend more and more time together, navigating each other's work and study schedules. At the same time, the narrator describes his tendency to make fun of Sean's habits to both Lou and Maria, both of whom comment that the narrator has fallen in love and fallen hard. The chapter concludes with Sean revealing that he had accidentally encountered a group of men having sex in a public washroom, and referring to them as "subhuman," a comment with which the narrator agrees.

The narrator gets a phone call from Lou, desperate to get married so he can be promoted at work. The narrator sets him up with a girl from his office, and within a week Lou is talking about getting married and saying how "shitty" the gay life is except for the narrator, it's less shitty than it was. While he and so many other homosexuals view their future as negative, he also is having a better time than ever being homosexual, partly because of his new attractive body and partly because of his deepening relationship with Sean. "I couldn't remember, exactly, why we had to be ashamed," he comments. Sean, for his part, feels increasingly insecure in that relationship, but is nonetheless able to indicate just how much affection he feels for the narrator. One day the narrator receives another phone call from Lou, just back from a visit with his fiance's parents and hating them, hating the idea of heterosexual married life, and telling the narrator that he is the love of his life. He confesses to being jealous of Sean, but before the conversation can go any further, he has to go since his fiancé has finished making supper.

Chapters 8 and 9 Analysis

The push/pull dynamic between homosexuality and heterosexuality intensifies in this section, the tension between the two different experiences manifesting in the lives of both the narrator and his ex-lover/current best friend, Lou. While both men feel the drive to and/or value of embracing heterosexual experiences and perspectives, their inner truths keeps them from acting on their drives for heterosexual "normalcy". The sense

here is of positive energy building and of shame falling away, of both community and integrity first experienced by the narrator in his present tense subway encounter expanding into life. All this makes Sean's experience of another subway sex encounter all the more ironic. There is the sense here that while Sean's experience of his sexuality is still confined by society's attitudes, the narrator's sense of self, at least of his sexual self, is becoming freer and truer, less restrictive and more in line with his identity. Or, to look at it another way, the narrator's experience of himself is, in fact, becoming less "subhuman" than it was. He can agree with Sean's comment, in that he sees his past behavior in much the same way, but because he is letting go of the shame associated with that behavior, he can see the behavior for what it is of a manifestation of shame, rather than identity. The circumstances of his own recent subway encounter, however, as previously discussed tend to suggest that for the narrator, his sexual identity is becoming less of a burden, less of a dark secret, and less shame-defined.

On another level, that increasing sense of freedom from shame, the narrator's movement into almost a celebration of his identity, entwines and fuels the book's sense of narrative momentum, that the story is building towards a climax, or high point. That point shows up in the following section, in the narrative of an event that, more than any other event in the book, points out the strong tie between the narrator's individual experience of growing freedom and the similar, parallel experience of the homosexual male community in general.

Chapter 10

Chapter 10 Summary

In an effort to help Sean come to terms with himself, the narrator suggests they attend therapy together. They are separated, however, by their experimentally-minded therapist into two separate groups, with the narrator becoming increasingly talkative and Sean becoming increasingly silent. The narrator becomes more and more knowledgeable and insightful, able to spot the games being played by other members of the group and discuss them in psychoanalytic jargon. He also, at times, analyzes his friends, a habit that makes Maria angry and leads her to promising to leave the friendship if he doesn't stop. The narrator also describes her increasing feminism, and her tearful comment that the recent deaths of lesbians Buddy and Betts were the result of their being female and ending up living in poverty.

Meanwhile, Sean is becoming increasingly disturbed, eventually ending up in a mental hospital and finally being shipped back home to his parents. The narrator becomes increasingly depressed and lonely without him, engaging in more anonymous sexual activity than ever and spending a lot of time in gay bars and in gay sub-communities. An article in the magazine the narrator works for denounces the emerging gay rights movement, triggering a surge in rage from the narrator when confronted by an anti-gay member of his therapy group.

When his sister, married with children, visits from Chicago, the narrator is shocked to discover that she is a lesbian, desperately in love with her best friend. He and Maria help her come to terms with her sexuality, and he becomes closer than ever with her, the narrator discovering that "her homosexuality exonerated [him]. There was something - genetic or psychological - in [their] makeup that made [them] both gay."

A while later, the narrator hears from Sean, who has entered into a relationship with a very masculine man and who confesses that he needed to leave his relationship with the narrator because he was "too gay". Shortly afterwards, the narrator prostitutes himself, and afterwards goes down to the crowded Stonewall, where he learns that Judy Garland has died. At that moment, the bar is raided by the police but instead of submitting, the homosexuals there fight back, at times angry, at times joking. Several men are arrested, but larger numbers keep coming, both facing down and outflanking the riot squad. The narrator, on the one hand excited about what's happening and on the other hand ambivalent, stays up all night, joining Lou and other patrons of the bar as they taunt the police and planning strategies for further confrontations. The next morning, they look through the papers to see what's said in the news.

Chapter 10 Analysis

The raid on the Stonewall Inn actually happened, and has, in the decades since it took place, been portrayed as the moment that officially began the gay rights movement. In other words, the novel's historical context defines the riot as a beginning. As portrayed in the narrative, however, it is simultaneously an ending, specifically the climax of a journey of transformation for the narrator but also, by extension and as previously discussed, for the gay male community as a whole. In other words, and as the plot of the novel suggests, it took the narrator and large numbers of men like him years to get to the point where they were even able to even think about fighting back against oppression, to a point where shame was no longer the dominant response to society's prejudices and violence. As the narrator himself comments in the previous chapter, he forgot what he was supposed to be ashamed about. He becomes part of a community of outsiders, if such a paradoxical entity can exist.

It's also important to note, however, how these triumphs are juxtaposed with lingering images of self-hatred and repression. The former manifests in Sean's internalized disgust with his sexual identity, while the latter manifests in the deaths of Betts and Buddy which, as previously discussed, echo the societal circumstances which they, as lesbians and as women, were forced to endure. In other words, their physical poverty echoes/manifests the spiritual / social poverty in which they had to live, the sort of poverty that the Stonewall riots were a profound, and important, reaction against.

Meanwhile, the appearance of the narrator's sister is not only an interesting turn of events and not only another component in the narrator's growing sense of self-acceptance. It also foreshadows contemporary scientific analysis that suggests there is, in fact, a genetic component to homosexuality.

Characters

The Narrator

The unnamed narrator is the novel's central figure, its protagonist, and is generally regarded as a thinly disguised self-portrait of the author. On another level, however, and as previously discussed, the narrator can also be seen as a distillation, an emblematic representation of homosexual American men coming of sexual, social and political age in the 1950's and 60's. This is, perhaps, the reason why the narrator never reveals his name where there is the sense that he is intended to be perceived as something of an "Every-gay," a simultaneously anonymous and universal representation of an experience of humanity, as opposed to a portrait of a particular human being/character. In other words, the narrator's experiences, the sense of shame associated with those encounters, his determination to cast aside his homosexuality, and his experience of being an outsider defined by sexuality are almost universally common to homosexual men of that generation as is his growing sense of identity and empowerment. His personal journey of transformation, his moving out of shame and secrecy towards a life of freedom and self-respect, can be seen as representative of similar journeys experienced by not only large numbers of individuals, but the community formed as the result of those individual journeys.

An interesting aspect to the identity of the narrator, and to how that identity might be perceived, is the question of stereotype and its relationship to the novel's central theme.

Anatole France, Franz Kafka

The writings of these two authors supply the quotes that introduce the book and, in the case of the quote from Kafka, its title. France was a Nobel-prize winning author whose work was initially regarded as relatively light, but whose writing became more cynical and darker as he became more politically aware. Meanwhile, Kafka's most significant work was published after his death, and was characterized by his vision of the world as meaningless, chaotic, and torturous, with the individuals caught up in its machinations helpless against its soul-destroying power.

Maria

The narrator first encounters the eccentric and bohemian Maria on one of his trips to the art school across the road from his conservative prep school. His friendship with her becomes one of the most lasting and influential relationships he experiences over the course of the narrative. While they are not always physically together, she continually and repeatedly challenges his thoughts, attitudes, and belief systems, at times in verbal arguments and discussions, at other times simply by being who she is and on one key occasion, by joining him in physical explorations of heterosexuality. In many ways, she lives his ideal of freedom and self-identity, but is notably much less inhibited by shame.

Paul

Paul is another of the students at the art school, viewed by both staff and fellow students as a "genius." The narrator feels a particular kinship with him, in that the narrator believes himself to be a genius and at least, he is told that he is by his mother. Paul's eventual suicide in Chapter 6 triggers something of an identity crisis in the narrator, partly because the narrator identified and idealized himself in the same way Paul was idealized, and if his idol kills himself, what hope is there for him?

Ivan

The free-spirited and open-hearted Ivan is yet another student at the art school. His influence on the narrator is less direct than that of either Maria or Paul. He is in the narrative primarily as another illumination of its thematic consideration of how individuals get caught in defining themselves in terms of an outside influence rather than in terms of an inner sense of identity.

Betts and Buddy

This pair of elderly lesbians is the first long-term homosexual couple the narrator encounters. Their briefly glimpsed story is virtually the only detailed reference to lesbianism in the book apart from where Maria has a tempestuous lesbian affair in Chapters 6 and 7, and the narrator's sister admits to lesbian desires but there is little or no evocation of the relationship between that affair and the world at large. The nature of such a relationship between lesbians and society is hinted at in their story, but overall the book does not explore female homosexuality in the same way that it explores male homosexuality. The point is not made to suggest that it should, but rather that it is important to consider the differences between the experiences of the two genders.

Tex, Morris, Lester

During his first year of college, in the midst of a string of anonymous sexual encounters, the narrator has somewhat more substantial relationships with three men. They are the masculine and world weary Tex, the effeminate and outspoken Morris, and the secretive Lester. These three characters embody and/or symbolize important aspects of homosexuality that include self-loathing and rejection of relationships in Tex, flamboyance in Morris, and shame-filled unhappiness in Lester that the author is desperate to avoid, having seen how they trigger hatred in others.

Betty and Kay

Betty and Kay are two Chinese students at the narrator's college. Because both women have rejected the traditional goals and lifestyles established for them by their

conservative parents, they represent an ideal of freedom and self-identity which the narrator aspires.

Dr. O'Reilly

Over several years, the narrator undergoes psychiatric treatment at the hands of the eccentric O'Reilly, treatment that eventually becomes both useless and resented. O'Reilly himself is portrayed as a fool and ultimately dangerous, his methods of treatment leading Annie Schroeder, another patient, even more deeply into mental illness.

Annie Schroeder

As mentioned, Annie is another of Dr. O'Reilly's patients. Unstable and the survivor of an abusive family, Annie becomes a friend and confidante to the narrator. Her fragile psyche is irrevocably damaged by her relationships with both O'Reilly and the manipulatively cruel William Everett Hunton.

William Everett Hunton

The narrator befriends the flamboyantly effeminate, sharp tongued and insensitive Hunton while in college. On one level, the narrator finds Hunton's sense of freedom and rejection of societal constrictions attractive and almost inspiring, but on another level finds the way Hunton uses that freedom as repulsive, another example of the sort of homosexual that the narrator is desperate to avoid becoming.

The Narrator's Parents

In terms of actual page time, the narrator's parents play relatively small roles in the narrative. They are, however, portrayed as having a significant, defining affect on his identity of being highly conscious of their social status and how they are viewed by others, they serve essentially as embodiments and manifestations of the societal pressure to conform intellectually, sexually, socially, and career-wise.

The Narrator's Sister

Late in the narrative, the narrator receives a visit from his sister who, over the course of her stay, reveals her tendency towards lesbianism. Her presence is a further influence in moving the narrator towards self-acceptance.

Lou

When the narrator moves to New York City, he begins a relationship with Lou, a financially and professionally successful older man with strong, challenging views on art, homosexuality, and life. The two men engage in a temporary sexual relationship that evolves into a close friendship, full intimacy ultimately hampered by Lou's addiction to drugs. Lou and the narrator are together at the Stonewall Inn when its homosexual patrons fight back when confronted with a police raid.

Sean

Sean is a young man with whom the narrator becomes emotionally and sexually involved. Sean is something of a mirror image of the narrator where both are insecure about their sexuality, but where the narrator is on an active journey to become more comfortable with that side of his identity, Sean ultimately rejects both the narrator and his emerging sense of openness, preferring to become involved with someone both more masculine and more discreet.

Objects/Places

Detroit

The narrator's journey through his discovery of sexual and personal identity begins in this American city, the location of his prep school.

Eton Prep School

Eton is the school in Detroit the author attends prior to the beginning of his university career. The school is portrayed as being traditional and conservative, so much so that the narrator frequently feels himself driven to escape.

The Art Academy

Across the street from Eton is an art academy to which the narrator flees when he needs to escape from Eton's stifling atmosphere. At the academy he establishes his long-standing friendship with Maria, his admiration of fellow genius Paul, and his enjoyment of bohemian sculptor Ivan, all of whom inspire him to reach for his own sense of freedom and self.

Chicago

The narrator's home is in Chicago. He visits the so-called "Windy City" on his breaks from Eton, and at one point spends a summer there, during which time he has his eye-opening affair with Lou.

The Chicago Apartment

While his mother is in Europe, the narrator moves into her apartment, spending less and less time there as his affair with Lou intensifies.

Tex's Bookstore

During one of his Christmas visits to Chicago, the narrator spends time at the bookstore run by masculine homosexual Tex, who introduces him to the complications of homosexual relationships and to homosexual activity.

The University of Michigan

This is the university attended by the narrator. Here he discovers his interest in Buddhism and the Chinese language, and frequently and repeatedly indulges his desire for promiscuous, anonymous sex.

Buddhism

A spiritual practice focusing on a personal relationship with the divine, the theories and practices of Buddhism are anchored in four fundamental principles. These are the beliefs that all life is suffering, that suffering is caused by desire, that heaven is a personal experience of being free of desire, and that Nirvana can be realized through a series of practices.

Public Washrooms

Throughout the narrative, public washrooms are the setting for many, if not most, of the narrator's sexual encounters. For decades in contemporary society, public washrooms were a common place for many homosexual and bisexual men to have sex with other men.

New York

After the completion of his undergraduate degree, the narrator follows Lou to New York. The narrator gains greater insight into and respect for the community of homosexual men there.

The Stonewall Inn

The Stonewall Inn, a popular bar for homosexual men in New York City, is the setting for the narrative's climax, a real-life confrontation between the police and its patrons who, rather than accepting police oppression, decided to fight back. Both the event and the bar's name have become synonymous with the beginnings of the male homosexual rights moement.

Themes

Coming of Age

In literary terms, a "coming of age" story is defined as a narrative in which a young character, male or female, is awakened to a broader, deeper, more mature, and realistic understanding of the self, of the world, of life, and of the relationships between the three. That understanding, that insight, can be social, political, moral, emotional, psychological, sexual, or any combination thereof. The process of "coming of age" in "The Beautiful Room is Empty" involves all these aspects, putting particular emphasis on the sexual but also highlighting the social and the psychological. Political aspects come into play in the narrative's final chapter, in a fictionalized account of a real-life circumstance that continues to have repercussions today, over forty years after the event took place. Moral and emotional elements receive significantly less page time.

As discussed throughout the book, however, "The Beautiful Room is Empty" can be seen as a "coming of age" narrative of not only an individual, but of an entire community and of a socio-political movement. The experience of the narrator is, or at least can be interpreted as, an extension and/or representation of the shared experience of many/most homosexual men living and struggling with sexual identity at the time and in the country in which the action takes place. In fact, the term "coming of age" has been somewhat modified, when used to describe the process of homosexual men coming to maturity, openness, and a sense of true identity. In those circumstances the process is called "coming out," or short for "coming out of the closet", with closet being a metaphor for where homosexuals keep their feelings and desires. When a homosexual person "comes out,", he comes out of the closet and out of shame, out of denial, out of self hatred, and above all out of a place of acceptance of being put into the closet by society's perceptions and attitudes. This, in turn, is the second of the narrative's primary themes.

Transcending External Definitions of Identity

An essential component of the "coming of age" process in general, and of the "coming out" process in particular, is establishing a sense of self and identity free, at least to a significant degree, of externally imposed definitions of who and what an individual is - in other words, free of expectations and pressures to conform. These definitions can come from society in general, from parents, from the media, or even from well meaning friends. The narrator of "Beautiful Room" experiences discomfort from all these sources. Society sees him as a hateful deviant, his parents see him as aimless, selfish, and in need of being "cured," the media see him as worthy of ridicule, and ultimately as unworthy of respect. On the other side of the coin, at least for the narrator, are friends and allies who continually tell him to face down his other external influences and behave the way they do, unaware that they are putting as much pressure on the narrator AS those other sources. Throughout the novel, the narrator is constantly confronted with

these external pressures, internalizing some while struggling to internalize others, the whole time believing that everything he is being told about himself, or told to explore about himself, is who and what he is. At the same time, he is experiencing a growing awareness of just how restrictive and potentially destructive these influences are, a growing awareness of a sense of self, of worth and identity, that only begins to feel secure in the narrative's final moments. This is why the ending of the novel or the end of one phase of the narrator's struggle for independence is also a beginning or the beginning of the next phase. In other words, the action of the narrative and the journey of its character make the thematic suggestion that transcending external definitions of identity is an ongoing, ever-changing challenge.

Being an Outsider

A particularly potent obstacle to the narrator's achieving a full and balanced sense of self-identity is his experience of being an outsider, not only in terms of his sexuality but in terms of how he relates to the world as writer, observer, and chronicler. As he portrays himself, he is in many ways defined and driven by a desire to fit in, to be accepted, to be approved of. The two aspects of his personality are clearly in conflict, and it is a conflict that the narrative never entirely resolves. The point must also be made, however, that even though he's observing and watching the incident from the outside, he still feels a connection to the emotion and drives that fuel it. Contrast this experience with his thoughts earlier on in the narrative of Chapter 2 in which he describes catching glimpses of other people's lives through their windows as he speeds by on the subway. Again, there is a sense of being an outsider, but here it co-exists with a sense of despair, that he is never going to belong, or to feel connected. This is a reaction completely different to his experience of being an outsider in the final chapter, at which point he does feel connected and that he belongs, if only on the periphery. In this sense of movement, there is again the suggestion that the narrator's individual journey parallels that of the struggle for homosexual rights in general where he is an outsider with others like them. Through their struggle and their determination to struggle no longer, they have become a community with its own definition and experience of being inside.

Style

Point of View

The narrative unfolds from the first-person and past tense point of view. This gives the story a sense of intimacy and realism, drawing the reader into the first hand experiences of its central character. There is a noteworthy exception of the narrator's sexual encounter with a group of men in a subway station, which is narrated in first person.

On another level, and as previously discussed, the narrative can also be seen as evoking the point of view of a community and that of homosexual men coming of age in America in the 1950's and 60's. At this point, it is interesting to look at point of view from the perspective of stereotype. Generally speaking, at that time the public perception of homosexual men and their behavior agrees with the narrator's self-portrait here of self-loathing, indulgent, and promiscuously obsessed with anonymous sex. In portraying the narrator as he does, the author seems to be suggesting not only that there was at least a degree of truth to the stereotype, but that stereotype and behavior reinforced and defined each other. In other words, the author is saying that the narrator behaved the way he did because society shaped him that way and society had the opinions that it did because men like the author behaved the way theydid. The author goes beyond stereotype in the final chapter when he portrays the participants and witnesses of the Stonewall Inn Riot as no longer being prepared to accept life as defined by another component of that stereotype as victims. In this context, point of view can be seen as reinforcing two themes of the narrative's examination of the nature of being an outsider and its examination of the necessity of and struggle to transcend external definitions of identity or to conform.

Setting

As the narrator himself suggests, his story is in many ways defined by its placement in time and place of America in the 1950's, a period of multi-level and multi-aspect conservativism, and the 1960's, a period in which that conservativism began to break down as a result of various forms of social revolution. Specifically, the narrator's experience of self-hatred and repression at the beginning of his coming of age process is clearly defined by external societal pressures to conform, while his gradual emergence into self-awareness and self-acceptance is defined by the societal transformations going on around him. It's important to note, however, that those transformations are examined and/or portrayed in less detail, and with less personal relevance, than the more vividly portrayed societal pressures against which the narrator struggles. Possible reasons for this may include the narrator's evident self-absorption and the sense of his being an outsider, isolated by his sexual and creativity from the events of the world.

Another important component of setting is the narrative's placement of the action in a series of large American cities such as Detroit, Chicago, and New York, each of which is portrayed with a sense of increasing openness and acceptance. Here again, the narrative can be seen as communicating the experience of a community of homosexual men through the story of one particular member of that community. When he finds his way to New York the narrator, as he himself implies, also finds his way into the company of large numbers of similarly oriented men, all of them finding the fullest experience of acceptance, the most secure sense of identity, and the most accessible sense of freedom they have ever experienced. In other words, the narrative's movement from setting to setting echoes, reinforces and plays a role in defining both the journey of transformation of its central character and its themes.

Language and Meaning

There are several noteworthy points about the book's use of language. Generally rich in imagery and defined by an expansive vocabulary, the narrative is in many ways poetically intense and emotionally evocative, at times almost self-consciously so. There is the occasional sense that while the writing is exceptionally effective at communicating the narrator's experiences, it is somewhat less so at welcoming the reader into those experiences. The point must be made, however, that there is also the strong sense that the author is writing for a particular audience of homosexual men. While the writing of the story, the way in which it's told, may be less than fully effective in connecting with the reader, it's very possible that the events and circumstances of that story can / will awaken echoes of similar experiences in the mind and memory of memories of that particular audience. This sense of an apparent target audience might also explain the graphically intense descriptions associated with the narrator's sexual encounters, writing which comes close to being pornographic, but which is certainly titillating.

Meanwhile, another important aspect of language is the book's dialogue, which tends to place similar words, phrases, vocabularies and structures in the mouths of all the characters. Everyone tends to talk like the narrator. This may be a manifestation of the narrator's interest in, and tendency towards, spending time with like minded people but which may also be related to by an authorial and/or thematic agenda. There are two possibilities here, neither of which is mutually exclusive. The first is the premise that "outsider" does not automatically mean lacking in perception, consideration or intelligence, while the second is the premise that intelligence and analysis is a valuable tool in overcoming external pressures on and/or suppositions about identity.

Structure

On one level, the narrative tracks an essentially linear structure, following the narrator on his journey of transformation that, as discussed in "Setting" above, has physical as well as metaphorical and / or psychological components. Physical movement from place to place is echoed in narrative movement from experience to experience. Here again, however, and as referenced in "Chapter 1 - Analysis," it is important to note that while

the narrator's psychological journey is triggered by a series of events, experiences and encounters, his story is defined less by plot and more by reactions to those events, experiences, and encounters. In other words, structure is not defined so much by traditional plot elements like cause-and-effect, but more by the cumulative effect of what the narrator goes through. Yes, the narrator and his story move forward through time and space, but the ultimate effect of that movement, the cumulative effect of the various incidents that take place during that movement, has more in common with the completion of a jigsaw puzzle than with following a chain of occurrences from beginning to end. The narrative evokes as much a sense of collage as it does a progression of episodes and consequences. The point is not made to suggest that the narrative is ineffective. On the contrary, for anyone of the apparent intended audience, it has the potential to be highly effective, and its generally associative sensibility is an important component of that effect.

Quotes

"After the stolidity of my childhood - the affluent Midwest of new Cadillacs, Negro maids, and wineless six o'clock dinners - the sheer effrontery of these painters staying up all night and stretching canvas tight as drumheads, then thumping them with brushes, crayons, charcoal, finally smearing the whole mess away with rags - that thrilled my timid heart." p. 7

"... the mid-fifties ... was a time and place where there was little consumption of culture and no dissent, not in appearance, belief or behavior ... everyone ate the same food, wore the same clothe, and people decided whether they were Democrats or Republicans. The three most heinous crimes known to man were Communism, heroin addiction, and homosexuality." p. 10

"[America] felt, at least to me, like a big gray country of families on drowsy holiday ... where there was no question of talking about the self and its discontent, isolation, self-hatred, and burning ambition for sex and power." p. 11

"As half-consciously I inched toward my desires for me, I clung to my official goal of stifling these desires. I wanted to be a heterosexual - perhaps with a bohemian girl?" p.

"[Paul's] silences were enough like my father's to fill me with grave anticipation. But he himself was completely different - as thin as my father was fat, as deferential as my father was overbearing, as open to new ideas as my father was closed." p. 13 (2)

"...the most important things in our intimate lives can't be discussed with strangers, except in books." p. 15

"My father was rich in his remote but solid way, and my mother, divorced from him ten years earlier, was poor in her flamboyant way, squandering money on clothes and economizing on food." p. 17-18

"I felt a real nausea whenever I faced America's frumpy cuteness, the Red Nosed Reindeer stamped out of dirty white plastic, the Hit Parade singers on TV dressed up to look like little kids, grown women in nylon Gretchen braids." p. 18

"My drive to ingratiate myself with other people was scarcely a moral urge, but rather the reverse, since I'd betray anyone or any principle to win the approval of whoever happened to be next to me at the moment ... my socialist posturing was also a way of social climbing, since I always included my father among the capitalists I was determined to dethrone ..." p. 21

"...I was refining all the seducer's skills - his ready sympathy, his tight focus on the prey, his anxiety to entertain, his ulterior mission to lead every conversation toward surrender and conquest. The seducer grows ardent only in pursuit." p. 29

"Tex ... was strangely likable, despite his melancholy air - likable because he carried his whole story with him wherever he went, like the housekeeper who worked for my father and stepmother ... her sympathy universal even when her understanding was partial." p. 39

"I had an image of a vast city ... a whole gray world in which I was biding my time, stupid with longing and fear." p. 44

"Defiance against my mother, no doubt, had propelled me into Tex's bed. It was her fault that I was 'acting out' on my homosexual impulses (my psychiatrist, Dr. O'Reilly, had explained it all to me." p. 47

"My stepmother told me my mother had accused my father over the phone of having brought about my 'sickness' through his absence; my father was countering the charge by administering to me his grim discipline." p. 49

"My own immorality didn't trouble me, since I knew I responded to other people and I mistook this ready sympathy for goodness. Besides, I wanted only to survive; other people, the ones with power - their acts might count." p. 51

"For the first time I'd crossed the line. I was no longer a visitor to the zoo, but one of the animals." p. 55

"I was on a dirty tile floor on hands and knees before a stranger I'd seen only from the waist down but whom I remember to this day because he'd presented himself so fearlessly, because his body, at least the half of it I knew, seemed ideal, and because his desire was so strong it was as expressive as words or deeds, the things that normally define individuals." p. 58

"... although I myself was at least young and in college, I already saw myself as vampire-cold, turned prematurely old as a punishment for vice, and not nearly enviable enough to be that exciting thing, a 'college kid'. I'd learned to feel nostalgia for my own youth while I was living it." p.75

"Perhaps because I hated my sexuality and believed it could be redirected, I'd come to see every aspect of my being as vague and shifting, and in that very cloudiness had lain my definition: I was the boy who hadn't started living yet." p. 82

"Maybe that was why the Buddhist doctrine of the non-soul ... attracted me so much, because it suggested I was potentially everything and actually nothing. I could wake up one morning gay or straight - or as nothing, since Buddhism seemed to annihilate such essences." p. 82

"The best explanation of masochism, the appeal of masochism, is that it accepts shame; the sickening shame one must swallow and hide is at last accepted, employed even loved ... my feelings were then masochistic, since for years I'd felt ashamed of my longing to dance with the swimming captain, to be worthy of him. Ever since, shame and gratitude have been for me the caste marks of passion." p. 104

"Until now I'd written mindless confession in a desperate effort to keep my head above the rising waters of despair and confusion ... I was toying with the idea, gleaned from my recent reading, that a design of sorts, not a stencil but a weave, could be teased out of all these balls of yarn." p. 108

"'American life is both Buddhist and intensely personal. It's nothing but these searing, intimate huddles and then great drifting mists of evanescence that drown everything in obscurity. Write about America and you'll reconcile these opposites.'" p. 113

"The curse of being the little creep my sister said smelled bad, of being the town queer as I scuttled from one toilet stall to a choicer one just vacated - this shame seemed to be lifted by the flaky turbot, the pale green Pouilly Fume, the slivered green beans and toasted almonds." p. 123

"[Lou's] vision of sex, of boys, and of poetry, even ... of drugs, was my first and strongest encounter with a pure theory of beauty. I'd always heard sensible down to earth values praised, but they were the only kind I'd ever observed, and the repeated endorsements seemed redundant. Now at last I'd met the man everyone had warned me against." p. 128

"Between us sex was never love, that sudden flux of affection that causes two people to break stride, pull apart, and stare smilingly at each other ... he disliked a spasm of delight much as he disliked any sudden visitation of feeling that broke through a form. He was a sexual formalist." p. 135

"My hero was a pervert, eyelids drooping shut from heroin, inner arm blue with bruises, and now he was cooing like a baby and had curled on his side and was staring up at his savior, his tormentor." p. 145

"I felt that I was a fake, an amnesiac, improvising my life moment by moment, and that nothing stuck to me, least of all insight ... every night I was shorn of the experiences I'd gained during the day." p. 147

"Homosexuality did not constitute a society, just a malady, although unlike many other maladies it was a shameful one - a venereal disease. Could one be loyal to syphilis?" p. 149

"...art should be a consolation for life, not a reflection of its ugliness." p. 156

"Before, I'd caught only half glimpses of queers, but like a hunter who pursues his deer deep into the night forest, at last I'd come upon a moonlit clearing filled with thousands of moving antlers, all these men." p. 164

"...a friendship can flourish only if watered by tact and pruned by diplomatic silences. With a friend we can recognize bounds but within those bounds respond with candor; with a lover we expect limitless communion but resort to stratagems." p. 171

"Because a novel ... is shared experience, a clumsy but sometimes funny conversation between two people in which one of them is doing all the talking, it will always be tighter and more luminous than that object called living. There is something so insipid about living that to do it at all requires heroism or stupidity, probably both. Living is all those days and years, the rushes; memory edits them; this page is the final print, music added." p. 176

"The idea that he might suddenly like me radically revised my version of who we were ... no matter which scenario the next few minutes or years would confirm, at least I was IN all of them." p. 192

"We maintained, of course, the premise that we were sick, that our experience was limited, that we were missing out on the good things of life, and that our old age would be lonely." p. 200

"The joke was that the great love of my life was a man who knew nothing about me and next to nothing about himself." p. 216

"We gay guys had taken over all of Christopher Street; even the shops were gay. Although the bars were owned by the Mafia, we somehow thought of them as ours. Just as this street, this one street in a city of ten thousand streets, felt like ours." p. 224

"...I caught myself foolishly imagining that gays might someday constitute a community rather than a diagnosis." p. 226

Topics for Discussion

Discuss ways in which the experience of being a homosexual man in America has changed and ways in which it has not.

In what ways do the writings of Anatole France and Franz Kafka, as referred to/discussed in the prologue and in "Characters," reflect and/or highlight the experience of the narrator?

Consider Maria's comment in Chapter 5 that America is essentially Buddhist in relation to the definition of Buddhism included in "Objects/Places." What do you think Maria means by drawing this parallel? Also, discuss the comment made by Hunton at the end of that same chapter - that "American life" is "past belief." Considering the context in which he makes the remark, what point do you think Hunton is making?

Given that two, apparently very telling quotes, about America appear in Chapter 5, what do you think is intended by the juxtaposition? What is the author saying about America, and about the experience of living as a troubled minority in America? Relate your thoughts to the quote from page 11.

Discuss the quote from page 156. Do you agree or disagree? What do you believe is the purpose/function of art in all/any of its forms?

Discuss your personal experience of outsider-ness. Have you ever felt like an outsider? What were the circumstances? How did your experience of being an outsider shape your relationships, your world view, and your perspectives?

Discuss your personal experience of being expected to conform by parents, society, and peers. What were your feelings associated with that expectation? Did you conform or not? What were the consequences of either circumstance?