

The Blazing World Study Guide

The Blazing World by Siri Hustvedt

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Plot Summary

The Blazing World by Siri Hustvedt is a tour de force novel chronicling the fictitious life, love, and work of Harriet Burden, an artist whose lack of recognition fueled her desire to lash out at the art world.

The novel begins with an Editor's Note, which is part of the overall work and is not a true editor's note. I.V. Hess reveals himself/herself as the author of the book, The Blazing World, and states that he/she has compiled the work based on the fact that he/she stumbled across a reference to an artist that Hess had little information for. Hess contacted Harriet Burden's family who graciously offered to speak with Hess. Unfortunately, Burden, herself, had passed away from cancer two years previously and was not available to be interviewed. However, her children, Ethan and Maisie Lord, produced nearly 25 journals/notebooks that their mother had kept over the years. The gender of Hess is never disclosed. Reasons for this become clear throughout the reading of the novel.

In this section the reader is introduced to Harriet Burden Lord, whose husband, Felix, a prominent art dealer, has died the year before. Now, recovered from his death, Harriet, who has reclaimed her maiden name of Burden, and has dropped her dead husband's last name of Lord, has entered a frenzied creative phase. She writes that she has been creating dolls and fetishes, all of them seemingly phallic in nature. The reader learns that Harriet has a brilliant mind and has always been a talented artist, but that her art was never promoted or supported by her husband, Felix.

Cynthia Clark is interviewed by Hess in order to gain perspective on Harriet. Clark shares that she only had a few limited encounters with Burden, but that she was never all that impressed by her work or her personality. She had dinner a few times with the Lords, and that at one particular dinner party, Harriet had ranted and raved about philosophy. Clark was sure that it been some sort of mental lapse.

Maisie Lord, Harriet's daughter, is interviewed by Hess. The reader learns that in the year following her father's death, that her mother moved from their lavish Manhattan residence to a renovated warehouse in Red Hook in Brooklyn. Maisie states that the upper floors were living quarters with many rooms and that the entire bottom floor was studio and gallery space. Then, Maisie shares, her mother began collecting strays. The reader is introduced to one of those strays whose name is Alan Dudek, but preferred to be called Barometer. He suffers from acute paranoid schizophrenia, but is also a brilliant and tortured artist. Maisie expresses her concern at the arrangement when Harriet gives Barometer one of the rooms in the vast warehouse to sleep in. Harriet, Maisie shares, told Maisie that Barometer was harmless and that he was helping her keep the place running, since Harriet, herself was in her early sixties.

The novel shifts back to more excerpts from Notebook C where Harriet continues to speak about her phallic art. She speaks to the fact that many of the pieces, some of them life-sized remind her of her late husband, Felix. She adds a warmth element to



some of the large pieces, so that the artwork, when touched feels warm, as if it is alive, but frozen. The reader learns more about Felix and the lengths that he went to in order to suppress and oppress Harriet's talent and art. The reader learns that Harriet had some early success in the seventies, but that after she married Felix all of it went away.

An interview with Oswald Case introduces the reader to the snobbery that is indicative of the art scene. Case, a self aggrandizing art journalist and gossip columnist tells Hess that he first covered *A History of the Western World*, the first exhibit attributed to Burden posthumously. He downplays the contribution of the piece to the art world and states that he does not agree with the critics who state that Burden created the piece on her own, using Tish as the front man. It is evident that Case is an egotist.

The reader meets Rachel Briefman, who is also interviewed. Rachel has been Harriet's best friend since they were 12 years old. She states that she has agreed to contribute to the book out of love and respect for her friend. She provides the reader with insight into the formative events in Burden's early childhood that may have lead to the often bizarre and eccentric behavior of her adulthood.

Notebook A is introduced to the reader, and contains mostly autobiographical information that shows the reader how she decided to use men as her fronts to show her art work. She meets Anton Tish in a local bar called Sunnys, and gives him a place to stay. She eventually talks him into becoming her first 'mask'. The reader learns that the art world has suppressed and underrepresented females for centuries and that Harriet has assigned herself the task of righting the wrongs for all of them.

Harriet creates the first work, *The History of the Western World*, and it meets with great acclaim. The work includes a naked venus in repose with various objects and written phrases on the body. Nearby are small diorama boxes, which she calls empathy boxes. In her journals she gloats and laughs at the establishment and their antics. Anton is immediately the golden boy of the art world and the reader sees him deftly avoiding any serious questions posed to him by various interviewers. However, the partnership sours as Anton realizes that his own true artwork has been sidelined and he feels as if he has lost himself. He tells Harriet, whom the reader learns goes by the nickname, Harry, that he is leaving.

The reader meets the next 'mask', named Phineas Q. Eldridge. Phinny is a black, gay man that Harriet meets while in Sunnys. It is only a matter of time before she pitches the idea of Phinny being her next front man. Phinny readily accepts because as a gay man he has also endured his own form of prejudice and suppression. He is only too willing to help continue the ruse. They create a huge interpretive art piece called *The Suffocation Room*. It is met with rave reviews and Phinny is skyrocketed to fame. They both share many laughs about the antics of the art world. After a year or so, Phinny moves on as he falls in love with someone and they live happily ever after in Argentina.

The reader learns through Notebooks O, T, U, and others that Felix was often cruel to Harriet in their marriage, having numerous affairs, remaining emotionally unavailable to her. The reader also sees that Harriet was a loving and dedicated mother to her small



children and that she turned her creative abilities into raising them for a good deal of her marriage to Felix. Her discovery of a note from one of Felix's lovers shakes her world and allows her to confirm her suspicions about him, but she feels unable to leave him, even when she confronts him and he does not bother to deny his infidelities. There are keys to apartments and places that she has never been. For the time being she resigns herself to existing.

She becomes very ill and can't stop throwing up. After a series of doctors she is told that physically she is well. She is referred to Dr. Ferig, a psychoanalyst who tells her that it is never too late to change things, to become who one wants to be. The vomiting stops almost overnight. Harriet continues to see him until her death many years later. The reader also sees Harry find love, again, and maybe true love for the first time. She meets a struggling poet named Bruno. He is her age and adores her for who she is.

Rune Larsen is the last 'mask' that Harriet uses. Unfortunately, his celebrity hid his darker nature and proclivities. After he assisted Harriet in producing a piece called *Beneath*, Harriet was ready, at long last, to make the big reveal....that she had produced all of the work over the last five years that all of the art world had been amazed by. Unfortunately, Rune turns the tables on Harriet and refuses to state that anyone other than himself created the work. She is furious and begins a campaign to discredit him. This backfires on her and paints her as a lunatic.

Saddened, angry, and humiliated, Harriet pulls herself together and begins a huge campaign to establish the fact that she was the creator of the various works. Anton and Phinny both come forward and agree that they did not create the works. However, Rune remains staunchly firm in his convictions and continues to paint Harry as a crazy, lonely, slightly psychotic woman artist whose desire to be famous was unobtainable due to her lack of talent.

Unfortunately, Harriet's health takes a turn for the worse and she is diagnosed with cancer. Shortly after a drastic surgery that removed all of her reproductive organs, Harry learns that Rune has died while creating his next art piece. Even in his death, which many thought was a suicide, he has managed to stab Harry in the back. His newest work included and incorporated elements from their earlier work, *Beneath*, thus convincing the art world that he was the one responsible for *Beneath*.

Harry dies an agonizing death, and does not achieve the recognition that she felt she deserved. However, two years after her death, Hess writes, her work was reevaluated and light was shed on the nature of the work. At the time of publication of *The Blazing World*, Harriet's work had been selected for a showing at a prestigious gallery in Manhattan. After her death she achieved what she'd worked a lifetime for.



Editor's Note/Harriet Burden Notebook C (memoir fragment)/Cynthia Clark

Summary

Editor's Note

Written to appear as an editor's note might, this fictitious editor's note is actually part of the larger work. Written by the editor, I.V. Hess, who acts as the silent narrator throughout the novel, the reader learns that two years after her death, Harriet Burden was more of an enigma than she had been in life. Hess states that upon contacting Burden's children access was given to the journals that Harriet Burden kept. Hess's gender remains unclear to the reader, as the gender of the editor is never established. As the reader makes his/her way through the novel, the reasoning behind this becomes clear.

Harriet Burden Notebook C (memoir fragment)

The protagonist shares in her notebook that she began creating small fetish dolls, some representative of Felix, who had passed away the year before. Some of the dolls that she created were realistic, others symbolic, some cold, some warm. At first her family (her children) believe that it is her way of dealing with the loss of Felix. Her son, Ethan, calls the dolls maternal monsters. Only her granddaughter Aven, thought they were interesting, but then, again, Aven is two and the protagonist says no one would believe her honesty.

Her husband, Felix, died while having breakfast with her and still, a year later, she's shaken by it. She had immediately moved into Brooklyn because she wanted to distance herself from the Manhattan art world which had so much been a part of Felix's life. He had been an art dealer, and Harriet had been his artist-wife. They had met in an art gallery; he 48 and she 26.

Their marriage was messy and loud. The children happened in fairly quick succession and any notion she had about being a viable artist left while she watched Felix continue to skyrocket into his own fame and glory. At one point she is so sick that she can't keep anything down. After all sorts of doctors she goes to see a psychiatrist who, after a round of tests to rule out physiological issues, utters what Harriet calls the magic words: There's still time to change things.

Cynthia Clark (interview with former owner of the Clark Gallery, NYC, April 6, 2009)

In this chapter the reader learns more about Harriet Burden via an interview of Cynthia Clark by I.V. Hess. Cynthia states that Harriet's artwork was rather unremarkable and that no one in the real art world would have ever carried it. She recalls a scene at a



dinner party where an art critic upset her and she ranted and raved, which surprised everyone because normally she was a wall flower.

The reader begins to learn that Harriet had created at least one persona in order to sell her art work. She created someone named Anton Tish, and hired an actor to pretend to be him. Cynthia reports that no one had any idea that he wasn't the real artist. She becomes defensive when Hess states that Anton supposedly wrote a very in-depth analysis in French, though it was well known that he didn't speak French. She argues that it doesn't really matter because the work had sold, people loved it, and as far as she is concerned the entire impersonation was just part of the actual art piece. Hess asks her if she would have shown them had she known that they had been produced by Harriet. Cynthia lies and says that 'of course' she would have.

Analysis

Editor's Note

The author cleverly utilizes the vehicle of an editor's note to give the reader information that they will need immediately in order to understand the entries that will follow. Thus, the reader learns in this chapter that the entire work is based on interviews with people who knew and worked with Harriet Burden. A great deal of the work will be comprised of excerpts from Burden's notebooks, all 25 of them. In order to keep the facade going there is a second section to the editor's note, and addendum, stating that a last notebook had been found which cleared up the question of Richard Brinkman's identity, that that he was really Harriet as well. The reader learns that the story that is about to unfold will carry with it the theme of alienation, gender bias, as well as tell the story of a woman who found herself but the world wasn't quite ready to see.

Harriet Burden Notebook C

In this notebook the reader meets Harry as she writes in the pages about her life's circumstances and how they have changed since Felix's death, her husband of more than forty years. It is interesting to note the symbolism in her illness. Her talent has been stifled and now, the mother of two, wife of an unfaithful and neglectful husband, her body is turning against her. She literally can't stomach it. She begins to see a psychoanalyst who gives her permission to be herself. He tells her that there is still time to change if she wants to. This makes her content to bide her time. Now, released from her former role as a wife and a mother, she is able to reinvent herself. She has done so by creating a large number of phallic dolls that resemble in some way both her late husband and her father.

These dolls represent a couple of things. First, they represent her desire, which she's suffered from her entire life, to connect with her father and with her husband, both cruelly distant and cold. This is why some of the dolls are also equipped with heaters, to bring warmth into them. The fact that they are also phallus suggests that on some level



she is completely angry at the culture that favors penises over vaginas. She also tells the reader in the pages of her journal that she wishes she had been born a man.

Cynthia Clark

The author cleverly inserts this interview with Clark, who owns a prestigious gallery in Manhattan. This reiterates the point that was made in Harriet's notebook in the previous chapter. The theme of gender bias is quite clearly seen as a type of prejudice against women artists that challenge the establishment, but more than that, it also shows the reader how trapped Harriet must have felt as having to labor under the label as Felix's wife, only. This interview suggests that no one was willing to take her seriously even though she was quite clearly well spoken and intelligent.

Discussion Question 1

What is the symbolism of Harry's phallic fetish dolls?

Discussion Question 2

What does Dr. F and Harry both suggest is the root cause of her uncontrollable vomiting?

Discussion Question 3

How would the novel have been to read without the Editor's Notes at the beginning of the novel?

Vocabulary

intellectual, parodies, provocative, exhibited, perception, elaboration, poetized, philosophical, complexity, sophistication



Maisie Lord/Harriet Burden Notebook C

Summary

Maisie Lord

This is Harriet's daughter, her youngest child, who is a grown woman now. She writes in her manuscript that she worried about her mother that year after her father died. She says that there were a number of human strays that came and stayed at her mother's apartment. One of them called himself the Barometer and had been released from the mental institution. When Maisie expressed her concern for her mother's safety, Harriet replied that the man is gentle and that he can draw very well.

Maisie says that her father used to call her mother, My Madonna of the Mind. At the time she'd thought it was a nice name, but as she got older she understood that it was in many ways demeaning. She says that the first time that she realized that her mother did not like her own body was when she told Maisie that she was glad that she hadn't inherited her breast size.

She says that when she read her mother's journals that she realized that her mother's relationships with the men who acted as her fronts, her masks, were complicated. Maisie also laments the fact that her mother was horribly misunderstood. She recalls that one day, when Maisie had just turned two, she took her daughter to visit at Red Hook (her mother's apartment). After they'd visited for a long while, her mother had told her to come and see what she'd been working on. It was a representational art piece that was of her father seated in a chair at the table with papers scribbled on and lying all over the floor. There were five spiraled staircases leading up and down all around him. The entire piece filled the small room, and was initially viewed through a translucent glass wall that was the color of milk so that everything was distorted, like a memory. Of course, it upsets Maisie because it does look so much like her father.

Afterwards Harriet had apologized for upsetting her, but she made a point of telling Maisie that she was not sorry for creating the sculptures. She said that there were many memories that needed to come out and that there would be more of them in the future. Maisie also remarks that for the first time that she can ever remember, her mother's hair was growing out.

Harriet Burden Notebook C

In these pages of the notebook Harriet talks about all of the dolls and fetishes that she made after Felix died. She says that at some point some of them also looked like her father, but that she never did feel compelled to make one of her mother. She says that she didn't have to chase someone that she lived inside for many months. Harriet likes to frequent a small neighborhood bar called Sunnys. While there she listens to a poetry reading and one of the performers, April Rain, speaks with her. After learning that April



has nowhere to go, Harriet takes her in and offers her a place. April stays for a week, then leaves. She was Harry's first artist in residence at Red Hook.

After April leaves Harry decides that she needs to have warmth in her life and works to add heat to some of her life sized sculptures. She finally does get them to work and she is thrilled with the results. The symbolism of these dolls is introduced and built upon in this chapter. On the surface she is making art, helping herself through the grieving process. However, in a more symbolic gesture she is bringing 'life' back to her art, her creative muse.

She hires Edgar Holloway, a friend of Ethan's, to help her construct the larger projects that she had in mind. Harriet wonders how her life would have been different if she had been born a male, if her art work might have been accepted more. This introduces the theme of gender. Not for the last time, the author will suggest that male artists are more readily embraced than female artists (regardless of medium). She says that much of prejudice is unconscious and most of the aversion that others have to something is justified in some rational way that makes it acceptable. She also laments her age. The art world doesn't want an old woman....they want young because they equate it with vibrancy and hope.

She begins to doodle with different variations of who she might have been, were she a man. This sets her upon the path that leads to her assumption of three different male personas. She offers various historical incidences where women assumed the role of a man so that they could be afforded the same opportunities.

While at Sunny's she meets Anton Tisch, another young artist. The Barometer calls him 'table'. Like so many she's met at Sunny's Tisch needs a place to stay.

Analysis

Maisie Lord

In this excerpt from an interview with Hess, Maisie introduces - and Harry demonstrates - the theme of being oneself. Harriet has realized that she needs to create the fetish dolls that she is creating because it is a way of her dealing with Felix's death, her lost self, and she is literally letting many of the bad memories, and some of the happier memories out through her art. She has also moved which is symbolic of her movement away from the life of servitude and repression that she experienced when she lived in Manhattan.

She moves to Brooklyn and begins meeting and taking in disenfranchised artists. She identifies with them on many levels, it seems. And in each 'stray' that she takes in there is a small piece of her that is revealed to the reader. Later, she takes in a man who will become one of the long term residents of the warehouse, the Barometer, Alan Dudek. He is called this because he says that he can feel the weather inside of his head. He is given to mental breaks and episodes, but Harry is patient with him and even understands his mania to some extent. His mother was blown away by a tornado when



Alan was young and he never recovered from that. In many ways, Harriet's own inner mother was taken from her, too.

Maisie mentions that her mother's hair is growing out and this is significant. For all of their forty years together, Harry's husband, Felix, never let her keep her hair long and wavy and flowing, as it was naturally. He made her keep it cut short and trim. Now, after his death, she's growing it out and it is once again, wild and unruly. This symbolizes Harry's return to herself and reiterates the theme of Being Oneself.

Harriet Burden Notebook C

April Rain, a young artist with tattoos of birds on her arms, symbolizing freedom, is one of the first artists that Harry helps after she moves to Red Hook. April doesn't stay with Harry long, but leaves when an old boyfriend comes along and offers her a place to stay instead. Harry is sad to see her go but understands that poor April is too weak to have understood what accepting her boyfriend's offer will cost her.

Harriet writes a lot about cultural biases and the theme of Gender Inequality is demonstrated in her treatise on prejudice that happens on a subconscious level. The reader also learns that not only is Harry's personality larger than life, but she is physically, a large woman, tall, big boned, and voluptuous, even in her sixties. She also speaks to ageism in the art world.

Discussion Question 1

What does Harry's hair growing out represent?

Discussion Question 2

Why does Harry decide to add heating elements to some of her fetish dolls?

Discussion Question 3

Discuss April Rain and why the author decided to include her brief story from the notebook?

Vocabulary

unsavory, ad hoc, hypomania, mourning, trivial, tics, excruciating, fetching, womanliness, interfered, pseudonyms, anguish, existential, belittlement



Oswald Case (written statement)/Rachel Briefman

Summary

Oswald Case

Oswald Case writes that he was nicknamed 'the crawler' but that his column for Blitz was titled, Head Case. He is a gossip columnist for the art scene, and is obviously conceited and self serving in nature. In this written statement he speaks about being given the assignment to cover a new work by Anton Tisch, who had created a huge installation piece called, The History of Western Art. In his statement he swears that while Harriet might have nurtured the artists that the claim that she WAS the actual artist is ludicrous. He gives a lot of evidence that, in his mind, points to the fact that Harriet didn't do the work. He goes on to insinuate that Harriet kept Tisch around as a sexual plaything.

Rachel Briefman

This is another written statement about Harriet. Rachel states that the only reason she agreed to contribute to the book is for Harriet's children's sakes, and for Bruno Kleinfeld, who had become Harriet's companion at the end of her life. She launches into her complete history with Harriet, starting with their meeting at school when they were both twelve. They shared their dreams, too. Harriet wanted to be a famous artist, or intellectual, or poet..or all three. Rachel says that they were true friends.

She writes that Harriet was a woman that was passionate for learning and that this desire to know more never left her. Her father was a professor and their home was peaceful, which was quite the opposite to Rachel's home. Later, she writes, when Harriet had Maisie, Harriet threw herself into motherhood wholeheartedly, which sort of surprised Rachel. She would still manage to make time to have tea with Rachel every week though.

Rachel remembers one meeting, shortly after Harry had started to see the psychotherapist because she couldn't stop throwing up. She said that she'd had an epiphany and that she was going to start writing and living her own story. Harry was upset with her lot in life, and that her suffering ran deep. However, she now knew that she could change it. Rachel suggests, in this chapter, that perhaps it would have been better if she'd been born a man because Harry, in her prime, was an enigma. Built like a bombshell but with the mind of a philosopher, people just didn't know how to take her.

She concludes her statement by remembering that Harry's favorite novel in school had been Frankenstein's Monster by Shelley. She says that she recently reread it and when she looked into the pages she found Harry staring out. At one point the monster says



that the monster is so lonely and misunderstood that its very existence seems cursed. The isolation transforms into vengeance, and became fury, grief, and bloodlust.

Analysis

Oswald Case

This interview is included because it gives the reader an outsider's opinion of Harriet and her work in hindsight. The reader learns just enough to know that Case doesn't like her and doesn't find her a credible or talented artist. He vehemently denies that Harriet produced any of the work that she claimed to have created, and the reader sees that Mr. Case is a little walking megalomaniacal jerk. If he confessed his doubt, if he were to suggest that perhaps Harriet did do the work, then he would invalidate much of what he had written in praise of the men whom were thought to have produced the work. It is easy to see the theme of alienation happening in this interview, as Case clearly is absenting Harry from any serious discussion of art. In his mind she was an upstart trollop with large breasts and long legs who married an art dealer and lived happily ever after. But a serious artist? Never, he claims. So, the reader sees that what Harry has been saying all along about the art establishment is completely true if they are all like Mr. Case.

Rachel Briefman

This section offers some insight into the woman Harriet would become. Rachel was her childhood friend, and remained her close and loyal friend until Harry's death. She tells Hess that Harriet's father was distant and aloof, never physically abusive, but never really 'there' for his daughter either. The revelation that Harry's favorite book growing up had been Shelley's *Frankenstein*, is revealing as it suggests to the reader that even back then Harry was unhappy with her body and wished to transform herself. This also is foreshadowing because *Frankenstein's* monster, driven by loneliness and isolation becomes vengeful, furious, and bound for retribution.

Discussion Question 1

Why does Rachel Briefman suggest that maybe it would have been better if Harriet had been born a man?

Discussion Question 2

Discuss the character Oswald Case and how he represents the very establishment that Harriet decides to work against.



Discussion Question 3

What sort of childhood did Harry and Rachel have?

Vocabulary

gaudy, denizens, nocturnal, trawled, mutual, delectable, paparazzo, intoxication, fragile, elevated, primate, hierarchy, envy, superiority, mimicked, posh, insecurities



A Compendium of Thirteen Characters, a Non Sequitur, a Confession, a Riddle, and Memories for H.B./Harriet Burden Notebook A

Summary

A Compendium of Thirteen Characters, a Non Sequitur, a Confession, a Riddle, and Memories for H.B.

In the first set of collected papers there is a small section where a young Harry was asked to solve a riddle...what is so fragile that even saying its name can break it? The answer had been 'silence' and it had resonated with Harry to the point where she'd kept saying the word just to hear it 'break'. The rest of the snips of errant thoughts are from various people. It would seem that at random moments Harriet would write them down and incorporate them into her work (using one of her pseudonyms). Most of them are insight into the human experience, on whatever level and age they appeared and happened. Sometimes they are her own memories of an event, sometimes from her children's memories or perspectives, and sometimes from random strangers' conversations that she found intriguing.

Harriet Burden Notebook A

This section is a journal entry that encompasses the first of Anton's 'successes'. Harriet laughs at the man she calls Case, who'd come to interview Anton. She laughs at how the establishment took what she offered them by way of a pretentious wunderkind and swallowed it in one large gulp. Harriet writes that she and Anton continually laughed themselves silly about how they were pulling things over on the stuffy establishment. The deal that she has struck with Anton is that she creates the work, and Anton keeps her secret and poses for the cameras and keeps the money from any sales.

The other artists in residence suspect, but they don't know about Anton's work. They think that Harriet funded the work, but that the work is entirely Anton's. This makes Harriet laugh, again. She has taken in another artist, whose name is Phineas Q. Eldridge (his real name is John Whittier). He is gay and has been disinherited by his family.

Phineas is a performance artist and there is a sadness that lies there, Harry writes. She says that he must be in his mid-thirties but that she can't really tell. She writes that she asked him if he was okay once, and he told her 'no'. He didn't bother to explain, and Harry didn't press him, happy that he had actually gone against propriety and instead of saying 'fine', he'd told the truth.



Analysis

A Compendium of Thirteen Characters, a Non Sequitur, a Confession, a Riddle, and Memories for H.B.

This collection of snippets of conversation are included, one supposes, as an insight into the very fertile and manic mind of Harriet shortly after Felix's death, and after moving to Red Hook. She has written down scraps of thoughts, capturing them before they left her mind. Included are conversations that she's overheard, things she's read in various books, and metaphysical and philosophical wanderings. This entire chapter is symbolic of Harry's mind at this time in her life.

The inclusion of the scene from her childhood which includes the riddle about silence, is symbolic of the silence that Harry will break in regards to the art world and its bias toward women, persons of color, and the LGBT community.

Harriet Notebook A

She and Anton have finally pulled off the first of their 'jokes' on the establishment. Anton is giddy with the attention and the glitz of the shows. Harry feels vindicated because it is her work entirely, and yet, she knows that had she attempted to show it as her own work, she would never have been granted a showing. She is indicating the first of many points she makes about gender, and demonstrates the theme of gender in this chapter. That Anton is a young, nice looking man, the media have made him their darling. The more he feigns indifference to their questions, the more abusive he is towards them, the more they love him. Harry and Anton enjoy their joke.

Discussion Question 1

What role or function does the Compendium chapter serve?

Discussion Question 2

How is the theme of gender bias and inequality demonstrated in Harriet's Notebook A?

Discussion Question 3

Why is Harriet drawn to Phineas?

Vocabulary

vindication, anagram, whetted, flourishes, buffoons, witticisms, anachronistic, pomade, wince, revelation, cynical



Rosemary Lerner/Bruno Kleinfeld

Summary

Rosemary Lerner

Rosemary is an art reviewer and writer. She claims that unlike the rest of the art world, she had noticed Harriet back in the seventies when she covered some of her group shows. She states that art critics are the worst lot of them all because if a work puzzles them, if they are intimidated, then they call the work trash. Rosemary states that Harriet's references spanned so many fields that they were hard to track. Rosemary says that part of the reason that most art critics loved to hate Harry was that she was smarter than they were, by far, and that the narrative literary quality to her art upset many.

Rosemary also writes that though there are more women artists than ever it is still no secret that the New York galleries show women far less than men. And, she says that art by men is priced more expensively than art by women. She is of the opinion that each of her masks seemed to uncover a different aspect of Harriet's imagination, and that her experimentation became a movement toward an increasing and almost sinister ambiguity. Rosemary considers herself an ally.

Bruno Kleinfeld

He writes that he had seen Harry many times before, crossing the street and going here and there. Bruno is a writer, a poet, but had fallen on hard times and had taken to eating dog food. He decided that he wasn't going to just watch her walk past one more day, so he ran out of his hovel and across the street to introduce himself to her. They debated over the word fortuitous, and then had dinner together. He found her exciting and erudite, and after a few drinks into the evening she began to share small glimpses of herself.

He recited some lines of poetry that seemed to fit her situation at the moment and it is as if a damn has burst. She invited him back to her warehouse and he agreed. Her work frightened him a little, but then, at the end of the tour, she said that she knows that sometimes she comes on too strongly but that it had been such a long time since she'd had anyone that could even come close to keeping up with her. Bruno writes that at that moment he was in love. After they made love, he writes, she cried, and he remained silent because he knew exactly what she was feeling...to have found someone and to know that it had been finally possible to be loved for who you were.

Analysis

Rosemary Lerner



In this chapter the reader learns that back in the pre-Felix days that Harriet had done a few shows and that there weren't all met with hostile reviews. Lerner had been one of the few that had given Harry rave reviews, which she is quick to point out to Hess in the interview. She also wholeheartedly asserts that the young artist that she knew then would have been completely capable of producing these types of works, even though they are quite dissimilar from one another.

Art, as a theme, is demonstrated in this chapter as Lerner discusses the idea of perception, much as Harry as done in earlier chapters. She states that it is no secret that art can destroy as well as make a person. Of this she is certain. She also states that there is gender bias in the art world, demonstrating and reinforcing the theme of gender.

Bruno Kleinfeld

When Harry wasn't looking for true love, it found her. Though it started in less than romantic fashion, Bruno was ensconced on his toilet at the time looking out of the window of his apartment, he became enamored of the 'woman of the coats' that he would see each day walking down the street. Finally, sucking up his courage he raced to meet her. They had dinner and when he didn't seem appalled at her philosophy or her meanderings on obscure texts and artists, she begins to realize that she may have found her soul mate.

Bruno tells the interviewer that Harry was so very careful to protect herself from men, in particular, because she'd been so misused and betrayed by them her whole life. So, when Harry sleeps with him, he knows that it is truly a gift of herself. She cries afterwards and tells him that she never thought that she would, at her age, find someone to truly love or that could love her back. She thanks him for making her think that it was possible. Bruno tells Hess that it was pretty much love at first sight for him at that point. The reader sees a very tender, very vulnerable Harry through Bruno's eyes, which gives the reader a more rounded version of Harry. Most of the time she is 'tough as nails' and eccentric by nature. Seeing this softer, gentler side of her makes the reader understand that her internal life and her external life are almost like separate people. And it is in this scene that the theme of 'being oneself' is demonstrated, the author suggesting that only when Harry was willing to put aside the woman warrior persona was she able to embrace love and to feel love back.

Discussion Question 1

Discuss art as a theme in the chapter, Rosemary Lerner.

Discussion Question 2

What about Bruno's character and personality resonated with Harry?



Discussion Question 3

What does Harry learn about herself after meeting Bruno and spending the night with him?

Vocabulary

tattered, decipherable, gravity, carcass, lurking, proverbial, rifling, descended, furtive, double-barreled



Maisie Lord (edited transcript)/Sweet Autumn Pinkney

Summary

Maisie Lord (edited transcript)

This section of Maisie's transcript concerns her first impressions of Bruno and his relationship with Harry. She writes that Bruno was a complete opposite to her father in every way. But, Maisie says, her mother was also happier with Bruno than she had ever seemed with Felix.

Maisie writes that she knew only toward the end of her mother's life that her father had ever been unfaithful, that her mother had kept his secret until then. She says that it is more difficult to accept unfaithfulness from a spouse than from a parent, because in some ways your parents are always gods.

Her first film, Esperanza, had been a documentary about a woman who had a problem with hoarding. Her mother had praised it for its visionary and representative qualities, but her father, Maisie writes, hated it. An argument ensued and it made Maisie uncomfortable.

Sweet Autumn Pinkney

This person was involved with Anton, and is a practicing new age healer. He writes about a time when he first went into Anton's studio at the warehouse. He says the energy in the room was off. Autumn helped Anton in the studio as they assembled a work, and on the third day Harry came by. He writes that when she came into the room that the energy fields lurched and that he perceived her as a red hot scream. He says that he wasn't even near her but had to back up because she had so much power in her, but that there was also something dark, too.

Anton confessed to Autumn that he viewed Harry as a second mother, so Autumn didn't offer anything against that declaration. He writes that he knew by her aura that she wasn't all that she pretended to be. Then the show happened and Anton had been upset that Harry hadn't come to the show.

A few weeks later Autumn saw Harry and Anton having a fight. Anton had tried to give Harry the money from the show. He later told Autumn that he'd wanted out of the arrangement and he thought that by giving Harry the money it would be a clean break. Autumn had known longer than most, he writes, about the arrangement that Harry had with Anton; that the work was really all Harry's.



Analysis

Maisie Lord (edited transcript)

This short excerpt from Maisie's interview chronicles her thoughts about Bruno dating her mother. She muses that she saw looks on her mother's face that she never had with Maisie's father. She truly didn't know that her mother and father weren't happy together. She feels badly for that, but is happy that her mother has found Bruno.

The reader sees how Felix was not simply dismissive of his wife's art, but he is also dismissive and unsupportive of his daughter's work as well. The reader understands that Maisie will not fall under her father's destructive sway, however, because her mother is determined to stand in the gap and protect her. It is only now, having gained some distance from the situation, and upon the event of her mother's passing that she understands just how much her mother protected both she and her brother from the whims and vagaries of their father.

Sweet Autumn Pinkney

This chapter is included because it offers the reader some foreshadowing. When Autumn says that Harry's aura indicates that she's hiding something from others, that she's being deceitful, he doesn't share it with Anton, who views her as a second mother, but he says in the interview that he knew all along that it was her that was producing the art. This also foreshadows the problems that she will have with another 'mask' of hers, Rune, later on in the novel. Anton's departure on a sour note throws a pall on their earlier victories. And the theme of Art as a destructive force is revealed once again as Anton believes that he has sacrificed himself on the altar of Harry's vengeance. He wants to go back to producing his own works of art, but feels as if now that he's been pegged for Harry's type of art that the world will not accept who he truly is. The theme of being oneself is also demonstrated as Anton makes a clean break from Harry and leaves to regain his own identity, paralleling in many ways Harriet's departure from Manhattan to Red Hook.

Discussion Question 1

Why is Anton unhappy?

Discussion Question 2

What does Autumn suggest about Harry and her work with Anton?

Discussion Question 3

Discuss the use of foreshadowing in both of these chapters.

Vocabulary

consciousness, chakras, cosmic, blockages, meditation, sculpture, squinting, emitting, vibrations, radiated, pulsing, gloomy, Tantric, minglings, ecstatic, dissolution



Anton Tish (interview from Tutti Fruity, “Just Checking In,” April 24, 1999)/Rachel Briefman (written Statement)

Summary

Anton Tish (interview from Tutti Fruity, “Just Checking In,” April 24, 1999)

This is a short interview piece that further shows Anton's compliance and immersion into the persona that Harry created for him. In this piece the reader sees that Anton is playing the part well, but has interjected some of his own interests into the interview as well. The person conducting the interview continues to ask him what influenced him and Anton keeps dodging the questions by offering up the most esoteric thoughts and random ideas, which further serves, or so the interviewer says, to prove what a boy genius he is.

Rachel Briefman (written Statement)

In this written statement Rachel opens with her writing that in February of 1999 Harry told her about Anton Tish and that all of his work was really hers. She writes that at that point she asked Harry what good could come of letting someone else take credit for her work. Harry had only said that the game was being played for a reason. At the appropriate moment she would stride out and expose and humiliate all of them. Who the ‘them’ was Rachel was not certain. But, she writes that at the time she had told Harry that humiliating the establishment was hardly a higher calling.

She told Rachel that it was not just about the humiliation of the big reveal, but that it was the idea to also investigate the complex dynamics of how people create what they see in, and in this way create perceptions that can easily be manipulated. It is all about the ambiguities of vision, Rachel writes.

Harry went on to tell Rachel that after the one large show Anton had wanted to go back to his own work but now found it elementary and pedantic. In short, he became disillusioned. He accused Harry of silencing his own muse, of making him forget his own artistic daydreams. Harry tells him to go pursue it again, then. But, he said he couldn't because he didn't recognize himself any more. Harry had said to Rachel, then, that she realized that she had created a monster in Anton. However, they finally part as friends. The entire event hurt them both and it threw Harry's notions about the success of her experiment into doubt. She would have to try again, she told Rachel. She had confessed that deep down inside of her there was an ugliness that was in her very bone's marrow and that it was terrible and might not stay hidden for much longer.



Analysis

Anton Tish (interview from Tutti Fruity, "Just Checking In," April 24, 1999)

This is another short interview with Anton after the wildly successful showing of *The History of the Western World*. This shows the indifference that Anton shows for the work and for the interviewer. What the reader also sees is the growing disquiet by Anton at all of the fuss about the work. It bothers him because he knows that he didn't really create it. This hurts his ego and it is evident.

Rachel Briefman (written Statement)

Rachel states that poor Anton is beside himself because though he'd wanted to go back to his old (and own) work he can't because he feels that now his earlier work is worthless and mediocre. He is worried that without Harry he will not be able to create anything. He's worried that the 'muse' has left him and blames Harry. Rachel brings up the question that most readers at this point may have also had: humiliating people is not a higher calling. What will Harriet do after she does her big reveal? It is clear that Harry hasn't thought that far. What is evident, though, is her confession to Rachel about the terrible darkness deep inside of her. She is speaking of a spiritual and emotional cancer, which later, of course, turns into real cancer. This lack of recognition, of stolen years, of complete and utter denial of her talent and brilliance has created a dark angry pit inside of Harry.

Discussion Question 1

What does the author seem to be suggesting about Harry's purpose for wanting to continue to dupe the art world?

Discussion Question 2

What is Rachel's observation about Harry at this point in her life?

Discussion Question 3

Discuss Anton's disquiet over his instant fame and what it has cost him.

Vocabulary

mystical, mannerism, quantum, enigma, concept, phenom, contemporary, insular, undisclosed, stride, expose, humiliation



Phineas Q. Eldridge (written statement)/ An Alphabet Toward Several Meanings of Art and Generation

Summary

Phineas Q. Eldridge (written statement)

Phineas writes that he played one of Harry's personas and is proud of it. He believes that in doing so he helped her portray a truth. He speaks of his earlier days and influences, and how Harry loved hearing about the world of Baaltamar that he'd created when he was a young boy. He also writes that he used to be an epileptic, but then, about as soon as he gave up fantasizing about Baaltamar the seizures had gone away.

Phineas says that it was Harry's son, Ethan, that introduced them to each other. Partly Ethan introduced them because Phineas needed a place to say, and secondly because Phineas wasn't crazy and 'out there' like some of the residents at Red Hook. Ethan wanted Phineas to become the 'manager' of the place for his mother. Phineas writes that he agreed immediately after he arrived and took in everything that was going on.

Phineas says that they grew closer and Harry shared some of her earlier memories of her father, and in particular her father's denigration of her early work. She felt a kindred spirit in Phineas, or so he writes, and after a while they started to work on a project that was originally titled, Suffocation.

Phineas talks about the theme of suffocation and that it resonated with him on many levels. As a gay man and a black man he had experienced prejudice on so many levels. Thus, the work titled, Suffocation Rooms was born. In each of the rooms was a box. The box would change and grow larger in each successive room, and the lid would be raised a little further. In the last room the lid is wide open and a figure is struggling to emerge. Phinny says that it was a self-portrait of Harry, as both a man and a woman.

He talks about coming back to the studio apartments one night and finding Harry dismembering and stabbing one of her dolls (metamorphs). He also begins to discuss the enigmatic Rune, who was to become Harry's final male persona.

An Alphabet Toward Several Meanings of Art and Generation

Ethan Lord

This rather existential rambling by Ethan Lord, Harry's son, is basically, and clandestinely, referring to Harry and her body of work. In this logical treatise the letter A represents his mother. In the end, he concludes that of all the alphabet letters, it all



began with A, and with the beginning of A the other alphabets had order and value. Without A, or his mother, there is nothing anymore. There is just absence.

Analysis

Phineas Q. Eldridge (written statement)

Phinny, his nickname, is in many ways, Harriet's alter-ego. He's male, but he's not, which is mostly Harry's dilemma: She's female, but not. In Phinny, Harriet finds someone who accepts who she is and even loves her for it. This type of acceptance neither of them have had much of in their lives. The theme of accepting oneself is demonstrated in this chapter as it indicates that a large portion of true friendship means loving the person even if one doesn't always understand them all of the time.

He agrees to become Harry's second 'mask'. The term mask is used often in this novel and is used as a revelatory object. The mask allows the person behind it to be freer than they ordinarily would be. Thus, with Phinny, in particular, and moreso than she had been with Anton, Harry is in her element. Both Phinny and Harry had been the subjects of repression and hate because they both longed to live outside of the norm.

The work, *The Suffocation Room*, is symbolic of their struggle to be freed of convention and, gender and cultural bias in the art world. The fact that the rooms grow smaller is symbolic of the narrow field in which those allowed 'out of the box' are given to work in. Though they are free, they are limited in their scope and reach. Each room grows hotter so that at the end of the exhibit the person's blood pressure has risen and the viewer is nearly stifled by the heat. This can also represent the fires of hell...that to be locked in to the rigid and narrow confines of society, race, and culture, is a hell all of its own. Both Harry and Phinny know this only too well.

An Alphabet Toward Several Meanings of Art and Generation

This short story by Ethan, Harry's younger child, is representative literature and gives the reader insight into his personality. He likes rules, and logic, and yet there is a part of him that, like his mother, longs to break free. When Harry reads the story and congratulates him on it, he is upset that she doesn't 'get' what he was trying to say. Harry is confused as to why he would be angry with her. Later, in this interview, Ethan suggests that looking back, she was right about the meaning of the letter A. Without the first letter there just isn't a complete set. The loss of his mother is evident.

Discussion Question 1

What is significant about *The Suffocation Room* exhibit?



Discussion Question 2

Why does Harry identify with Phinny so much?

Discussion Question 3

Why do you think Harry was dismembering one of the dolls that she created that looked so much like Felix?

Vocabulary

nearsighted, mulatto, queer, intimate, persona, seizure, tremors, sentimental, interracial, tango, pariah, affliction, pious, rambunctious, unholy, zeal



Harriet Burden Notebook B

Summary

Harriet Burden Notebook B

In this notebook Harriet discusses the meaning of perception and memory and concludes that it is largely a matter of perspective as when a person doesn't remember, they repeat. She's been seeing Dr. F who has been asking her to remember various instances and it has uncorked many memories that she's had bottled up and they are spilling out, she writes.

She recounts a time when she was four and her mother came to find her. Harriet had been in her father's study. When her mother asked her what she was doing in there she told her mother that she was smelling his books. She laughed at Harry, but now Harry doubts whether she actually remembers that or if she is remembering the story as it was told to her by her mother.

Then she relays to Dr. F another memory about Felix. She'd found a note in Felix's blue suit. It had been addressed to 'Felix the Cat' and it was from a couple from America who apparently engaged in a menage a tois with him whenever he was in town. She had the note and before Felix left she handed him the note. He professed his love for her and said that his involvement with them was not a reflection on his feelings for her. At the time she had just taken that response and gone on with her day. Dr. F interjects and says that Harry might not have recognized or acknowledged how angry she was. Harry agrees.

She also recounts a time when she'd been taking care of her dying mother in a nursing home. At the end her mother had hallucinated. During one of these episodes she let Harriet know that her father had not wanted her; that he had become upset when he'd learned that his wife was pregnant with Harry. She recalls feeling ashamed, even though her mother would go on to say that once he got to know Harry he loved her. Harry is not sure.

She switches to a joyful moment, where she is suckling a newborn Ethan, and Maisie is gathered into her under her arm. She feels like a completed triple bodied being, and she is happy. She grasps onto another good memory, one of Bruno. She reflects on how he appreciates her, loves her old and aging body. She ends the passage stating that she is going to sleep with these pleasing memories of being loved and wanted.

The action picks up a few days later when she has added to the journal entries. She mentions that Aven has started nursery school and is feeling stressed. She's decided that she has an invisible friend living in her throat, named Radish. Harry understands this need as she had her own imaginary friend named, Bodley, who was with her for many years.



She writes that she and Phinny have been out and about and he also has noticed that people tended to discount what she had to say about art, as if she were merely an ornament. Bruno argues that she needs to overcome her insecurities and just come out about her work. She disagrees and Phinny agrees that no matter how brilliant her work is when people know that it is hers they see it as old woman work, or woman work, or something inferior. When they see it as a work by a gay man, all of a sudden it takes on a different appeal and look to it, even though it is the exact same work.

Harry cites some research that was done where prior to the 1990s whenever a woman's work, in particular essays, were read by other women, they were still seen as inferior than if that same essay was offered, but with a male name attached. However, she states, after 1990, if a woman had a degree or credentials then the playing field was leveled, even if the men didn't have the credentials. The women were seen to be on a same par. Bruno continues to be her most rabid fan and says that she needs to just out with it and give the jerks a chance to come around. Phinny and Harry let him talk, but understand in a way that he can't, that the jerks never do come around.

She briefly shares that she has met a man named Rune, an artist whose exhibition intrigued her. Better yet he was not only able to speak intelligently and academically about memory and perception, but he was also on the same level as Harry. She is ecstatic to have found him because in all of her life she never found anyone who truly understood the level on which she thought or spoke, not even Bruno. She felt, at least briefly as long as the meeting lasted, that she had found a true partner, one that could keep up with her mind. He emails her a few weeks later to continue their discussion about perception.

Analysis

Harriet Burden Notebook B

This entire selection from the notebook is dedicated to the theme of gender inequity in the art world. She cites several instances that prove her case is a just one. First, she says that people were discounting any contribution she might have when she is with Phinny, almost all of them deferring to him. She is treated as a prop, though not by Phinny. Bruno asks her if she isn't looking for reasons to be angry, but Phinny argues supporting Harry's statement. It is all about perception and the way art is viewed when it is known that the artist is male or female. This notebook goes to great lengths to prove her case about this, citing research studies done in the 90s.

She also discusses a new artist she's met named, Rune. He is already a minor celebrity in the art world and she wonders if being a male and being a celebrity also could skew a person's concept of the art they are viewing. From the instant Rune speaks with her, the reader can sense that he is as adept at word play as Harry is. She is moved and touched that she has finally found someone that she believes is her mental equal. They have long and lively discussions on all sorts of esoteric philosophies and studies. Bruno is jealous, but Harry tells him that the attraction is not a sexual one. Bruno warns her



that there is something 'off' about Rune, offering the reader some foreshadowing of events to come.

Again, the reader sees that what Bruno and Harry have is real and meaningful to them both. What is striking, however, is that now she has everything she needs to be happy, if only she could let go of her need for revenge on the art world. The reader knows that if Bruno were to ask her to run away with him, that she would not do it. She hasn't had the big reveal. Bruno serves, in many ways, as the gentle and loving voice of reality and of life. He makes her feel vibrant, loved, and alive. He also acts as her conscience, urging her to give up her notions of taking on the establishment. Harry refuses.

Of note are the imaginary friends that both Aven and Harry have had as children. Bodley was Harry's imaginary friend that she had for many years. Radish is Aven's friend that lives in her throat and says things that Aven would never really say. Symbolically, Aven is speaking out for herself in a way that the culture would accept from a child her age. Were she a male child, one has to wonder, would her outbursts simply be seen as 'boys being boys' without the necessary production of an imaginary friend? At least this imaginary friend has a voice, and Harry offers that her own Bodley was there to comfort rather than protect or educate those around her. She is glad for her granddaughter.

Discussion Question 1

Why do both Aven and Harriet as children develop imaginary friends?

Discussion Question 2

Discuss the character Bruno Kleinfeld and his role/importance to the protagonist.

Discussion Question 3

As the story progresses, what becomes apparent about Harry's need for revenge?

Vocabulary

confabulation, falsification, association, amnesia, neurologists, altered, constriction, litany, chiming, proxy



Bruno Kleinfeld/Oswald Case

Summary

Bruno Kleinfeld

In this chapter Bruno confesses that despite their closeness, Harry was never able to shake Felix's ghost. He overshadowed even her dreams, often causing her to wake up in a cold sweat, afraid that he'd somehow not truly died. Bruno derides Felix and his many tragic flaws, the worst of which, in his opinion, was his repeated attacks and suppression of Harry's artistic self. In frank terms he tells the reader that Felix never fought for Harry, never supported her, never attempted to help her promote her work, when he could have so easily done so.

This chapter shows the depth of Bruno's love for Harry and the frustration and anger on his part for the significant damage that Felix did to her. He also states that this was about the time that Harry started meeting and conspiring with Rune Larsen. Bruno didn't like him from the start, he writes. He was too slick, too cosmopolitan and quite different from the other 'masks' she'd worked with. He warned her that there was something 'off' about Rune, but Harry refuses to be swayed, Bruno writes. This was also the time of the 9/11 attacks and living in NY at the time, Bruno writes, affected them all. Harry tells Bruno, while she's crying about the attack, that mankind is the only species that kills for ideas. It was then that Bruno writes that he began to see the depth of the need for revenge on the art world that Harry had. It frightened him and frustrated him because he felt that she limited her freedom by giving in to it. He asks her to just run away with him, to leave it all behind, be truly free. She refuses.

Oswald Case

Case still refuses to believe that, as part of the established art world, that he had been duped or used, or abused, by Harriet Burden. He holds up for example the post 9-11 artwork by Rune, called Beneath. He says that while he can credit Harriet for being Rune's muse, he certainly cannot give her credit for Rune's work. He believes that Rune used Harriet as a vehicle for his own ends, and that the product of that partnership (and he says he uses that term loosely) is that Rune still retained his own strong identity in all of the works, an identity that had already garnered attention in the art world prior to his HB days.

Analysis

Bruno Kleinfeld

What becomes evident in this instance is Harry's complete dedication to her work, even if that work will turn her into something dark. This is underscored by her work with Rune, who is, himself, dark and sinister. He is too slick, too perfect, and Bruno states again



that he did not ever trust him. He tests Harry's love for him by asking her to run away from him and abandon this need for revenge, but she just thinks he doesn't understand because he is a man. Here, the theme of gender inequity is reversed and the reader sees that Harry is assuming that Harry doesn't or can't understand prejudice or a need for recognition for one's work. This is demoralizing to Bruno who leaves her to her work for a while.

Later, after the 9-11 attacks Harriet's statement about people being the only ones that kill for their ideas foreshadows what Rune will do, not only to himself, but to Harry. Though she is not aware of it at the time, nor is Bruno, is that Rune represents the beautiful veneer of the art world that covers the often dark soul and even darker business practices toward women.

Oswald Case

He continues to disavow that any of the work produced by either of the three men were attributable to Harry. Though he's been presented with solid evidence at the time of the interview, he still refuses to admit that he, as well as others, were very wrong about Harriet Burden. This indicates the staunch refusal to accept change within the art associations, culture, and organizations.

Discussion Question 1

Why does Harry turn down Bruno's proposal to run away?

Discussion Question 2

Discuss the theme of gender inequity in the chapter titled, Bruno Kleinfeld.

Discussion Question 3

Discuss the character of Rune Larsen.

Vocabulary

irony, destiny, wringing, earsplitting, convulsion, esteemed, cringingly, motto, bathetic, catastrophe, superconductivity, simulation, intervene, intensity, banal, cultivated, narcissism, mythology



The Barometer/Maisie Lord

Summary

The Barometer

This chapter is a transcription of a taped interview that Phineas Q. Eldridge did with him in 2001, a month after the NYC attack. Phinny asks him about living with Harry and the Barometer says that he would like to leave, but that he can't. He believes that he protects Harry from a dark specter that comes in the middle of the night. When Phinny continues to question him, he says that the specter is a fallen angel with wings like a peacock.

Maisie Lord

In this chapter Maisie reveals a time when her mother just confessed to both she and Ethan that Phinny was her 'mask', that he was showing her work for her. By way of explanation her mother had produced many examples of women who had produced phenomenal work, but had it represented through male personas.

She attends the first opening of Phinny and her mother's work. She states that it always astounds her that the people who generally attend these first showings care less about the actual work than they do with being seen there. Harry actually attends as well, but stays in the shadows. Rune also made an appearance, scattering his glamour dust around him, Maisie writes. Later, they both step outside for a smoke.

Rune tells Maisie that he knew Felix a little bit in the past. Then he holds out a key to Maisie that he says no longer goes to anything. When Maisie looks at him in confusion he laughs at her and says that she doesn't know. Maisie has had enough and starts to leave, but he grabs her scarf which tightens around her neck. He pulls her to within inches of his face and she shoves him back. He apologizes and she leaves.

Analysis

The Barometer

The reader gets a glimpse into the scrambled and furtive mind of The Barometer. He was interviewed by Phinny just after the towers were bombed in NYC. The Barometer rails against the unfairness of life and that Harry is in danger. The author is using the rantings of a mental patient to offer another foreshadowing of bad events on the horizon for Harry from someone who is darker than she is. That the author uses Barometer to say this means that the event that will happen to Harry will be one that will involve mental games, or a mental or psychotic break.

Maisie Lord



Maisie attends Phinny's work with her mother and makes a statement about the art as opposed to the people who attend the art showings. She says that while the art is thoughtful and provoking, most of the attendees care less about the art than about the social aspect. She also meets Rune for the first time, and like Bruno, is creeped out by the man. Rune's tendency toward violence is indicated when he pretends to be strangling Maisie with her scarf. The reader begins to understand that this may very well be the fallen angel that Barometer was raving about in the previous chapter.

Why Harry can't see this darkness in Rune is a good question to be asked, here. Is it because her desire to avenge her sex, to uphold art to a higher calling, makes her blind to Rune's darkness? Or does she believe, arrogantly, that she can control him? While the Barometer is outwardly chaotic, it is clear that Rune is inwardly chaotic.

Discussion Question 1

What is the Barometer's function within the narrative?

Discussion Question 2

What most likely makes Harry blind to Rune's cruel tendencies?

Discussion Question 3

When Harry goes to Phinny's showing, where does she stay and what does this say about her?

Vocabulary

proclaimate, totalitarian, reprobate, viral, rumbles, wobbling, barrier, wrestle, sinew, metamorphoses, changelings, omens, arch enemy



Patrick Donan/Zachary Dortmund

Summary

Patrick Donan

This is a review of *The Suffocation Rooms* by Patrick Donan. He has interviewed Phinny about 'his' work. It is clear that Phinny is resisting giving the interviewer any real information about the creative process or the interpretation of the rooms. When asked if it was directed toward furthering the plight of the LGBT community, Phinny laughs and says that there are all sorts of oppression and suppression. The writer gives up on the interview.

Zachary Dortmund

This is another review of *The Suffocation Rooms*. This reviewer states that the work is a political commentary about the self technology of desire and a body without organs which echoes Eldrige's life as a queer man.

Analysis

Patrick Donan

This is an interview that is included in the novel, and sheds light on Phinny's assumed persona for this work. He clearly is playing Harry's game of telling them everything about nothing, which they love.

Zachary Dortmund

This is another review of *The Suffocation Room* that Phinny and Harry created. This reviewer imbues the work with qualities of a high aesthetic, using extremely superfluous wording to take up space on his page. What is interesting about this interview, and when taken as a whole with the previous chapter, is that these reviews are all doing what Harry had hoped: skew the perception once again. Presented by a gay black man, their interpretations of the work are completely different from what they might have been had Harriet stepped forward.

Discussion Question 1

What does Phinny mean when he tells the first interviewer that there are all sorts of suppression and repression?



Discussion Question 2

Why does the author include these two reviews in the larger work?

Discussion Question 3

What is suggested about perception and art in both chapters?

Vocabulary

consists, monologues, overt, eerie, intersex, cabaret, gradual, insulation, materialistic, complacency, suffocation



Harriet Burden Notebook K/Notebook A/Notebook M

Summary

Harriet Burden Notebook K

Harry talks about Rune. She says that Anton was her Green mask, and that Phinny was her Blue one. Rune, she believes is her next mask if she can only convince him. She wonders what color he will turn out to be. She laments and celebrates the fact that Phinny is leaving the game. He's met an Argentinian who adores him. She will miss him as she believes that he's been her best 'mask' so far. But she's genuinely happy for him, too.

Harry thinks that maybe Rune's color will be gray because he seems made of stone, like a rune stone. She also thinks about his propensity to lick his front teeth as if to rid them of something. She acknowledges that he is something of a trickster and like the trickster figures in mythology can be just as likely to turn the tables. Still, he intrigues her. She will turn the tables, somehow, and convince him that he wants and needs to become her mask.

Harriet Burden Notebook A

In this section of the notebook Harry is discussing the fact that Bruno, whom she has nicknamed, Bear, has decided to write a memoir. She is so happy for him and thinks that if he had just had fun with his muse all along that he would have moved on toward the success that he never had as a poet.

She switches to a memory about her mother and thinks that she and her mother grew closer to each other at the end. She comes to the conclusion that her father, like Felix, punished her mother with silence. Felix employed the same technique with her, she writes. Whenever they would have dinner parties she never was required or encouraged to say anything.

Harriet Burden Notebook M

In this notebook the reader finds Harry contemplating her greatest work: a large living woman replica. She states that the colossus must not be an either/or sort of creation. She references the Duchess of Newcastle, Margaret Cavendish, who was a 17th Century female intellectual. The work of fiction that the Duchess created was called *The Blazing World*, and Harry believes that her colossus woman will be called this as well. 'Mad Madge' they had called the Duchess, and Harry writes that she was an amazing woman.



Analysis

Notebook K

The reader sees that Harriet is aware of Rune's potential to turn the tables on her. She is determined to outplay him at his game. She makes a reference to a literary work in which the woman tricks the man into thinking that the idea was his all along. Harry decides to use some of the same manipulation. What the reader hates to see is Harry using Rune this way, even if Rune is rather unlikable. Isn't she perpetuating the same low techniques that were used by countless men against women, and returning to the oldest womanly trick in the book? It seems almost a reversal in her determination to forge her new destiny as a woman free of convention.

Using silence as a punishment is introduced in this chapter, as well as the theme of gender. In the past the men in her existence punished their women by remaining silent, Harry suggests. Her memory of her mother and father, and then her own experience with Felix leads her to believe that men, at their very core, desire to silence women because they are afraid of them. She believes this is her key to seducing the seducer, Rune, and getting him to play her game using her rules.

Notebook M

Harriet is working on another project but does not have a 'mask' intended to represent this one. It is a huge woman with living compartments all over her body. She calls this woman The Blazing World. The name itself is representative of Harry's desire to breath fire and be bigger than life. She longs to show the world all of her various facets and be accepted for the artist she is. That she doesn't have anyone to be used as a mask for this piece, many indicate that she is planning on using this piece as her 'coming out' project when her true identity is revealed to the art world.

Discussion Question 1

When one reads Notebook K what is the one great assumption that Harry has made about Rune?

Discussion Question 2

Why is Harry falling prey to some of the same trappings of the men she rails against?

Discussion Question 3

Discuss the symbolism of The Blazing World.



Vocabulary

defy, manipulation, titillation, tumescence, tandem, sadistic, inescapable, trait, vulnerability, tryst, phantasm



HB Notebook T/Notebook O

Summary

Harriet Burden Notebook T

It is May of 2001 in this chapter and Harry has convinced Rune to become her mask. She says that he is brilliant in his own way but that his ideas are jumbled and unfocused. Rune tells her that he believes that artificial intelligence will take over and become aware in 2030. Harriet doesn't really care since she will be dead by then, she's sure.

Rune believes that he is being driven by something called 'the Singularity', which means that something will be created that will not only outstrip its creator, but surpass and possibly replace him. Harry sees the Singularity as more representative of both a birth fantasy and an escape fantasy. She sees a kinship in him though, a longing to leap out of his own biography. Harry understands this.

Harriet Burden Notebook O

This notebook was discovered by Maisie in 2012. It was written in June of 2001, a month after Rune agreed to be her next mask. She has traveled to Nantucket where the rest of her family will meet up with her for a vacation. There is so much of Felix there that it seems to overwhelm her. Many of his things are still in the closets. Bruno is visiting with his own family and will not be there. She has told Bruno that Rune will be coming so that Bruno won't be jealous of him.

Rune arrives a few days later. Harry studies him and writes various descriptions of the way he moves, acts, and postulates about the fact that his entire attraction to others is his belief in his own ability to seduce whomever he is with. He talks about his sister, Kirsten, with whom he shares everything. When they were children they had invented a language of their own called Runesten. Harry writes that then she knew that it was time to introduce the idea of his being her mask on him.

She writes that she had told him that art lives in its perception only and that he would be the last of three masks, and that he would be the pinnacle of them all. Rune likes the idea of pulling a fast one but says that her ideas were outdated and a little lame. He argues that she is just as guilty, as prejudiced, as the men and the establishment she rails against. This takes Harry back a bit and she writes that she'd never considered this. She comes back with the fact that it has evolved from mere vengeance into a story that needed to be heard. He asks if what she is wanting is to 'wear him' for one large exhibition. She writes that she told him yes and he says that she needs to wear him in order to find something else in herself. She's afraid that she's opening a door that she might not be able to close.



They decide to don masks and role play thinking that this will jar loose something for the exhibit. They do and what comes of it unsettles Harry. As a man behind the mask, the persona she had adopted, she became an amalgam of both her father and Felix. Rune adopted the persona of a young female artist. At the end Rune is elated, but Harry is devastated. Later, as they are cooking dinner, Rune states that an artist friend of his committed suicide the year before. Harry is sympathetic, but Rune says that some deaths are more beautiful than others. Harry disagrees.

Analysis

Notebook T

Harry begins to bond with Rune as they spend long hours together talking endlessly about various topics. She believes that she is fully on her way to convincing him to proceed as her next mask, and that he is as malleable as her other male personas have been. Though he hasn't told her anything about his life before art, it is clear through his discussions with her that his childhood might have been dark and foreboding. His desire to escape, to break free of his body, to be embraced and absorbed by machines, is indicative of someone who has little regard for human life. He is borderline sociopathic, only Harry can't see it.

Notebook O

In this notebook the reader sees Rune pushing back against some of Harry's ideas. None of her other 'masks' argued with her about the direction of her work and she is set back by his disagreement. It is during this journal entry that the reader sees that she is beginning to wonder if she isn't about to unleash a Pandora sized mistake.

Harry is further unsettled and a little rattled when she and Rune decide to role play, using masks. He assumes the persona of a woman named Ruina, and Harry plays a man named Richard Brickman. The role playing becomes violent, with Harry assuming a domineering and abusive stance over Ruina. It gets too real for Harry and she puts an end to it, but Rune just laughs hysterically at her discomfiture.

Discussion Question 1

What is an early indication in Notebook T that things are not going to go as smoothly with Rune as with her other 'masks'?

Discussion Question 2

What about Rune's personality lends itself to the idea of The Singularity?



Discussion Question 3

Why did Rune simply laugh when the mask incident became too intense and clearly upset Harry?

Vocabulary

stable, tremble, grandeur, pleading, wheedled, contemptible, murmur, protestations, rationally, invigorated, enrages, jovial



Rachel Briefman/Phineas Q. Eldridge

Summary

Rachel Briefman

Rachel has had a stint put in her heart and writes that she is finding Harry's continual litany of rage against men tiresome. She also wholeheartedly responds to the suggestion that Harry was delusional or that the final work by Rune wasn't hers. It was, one hundred percent, she writes emphatically. She says that when they were together last that Harry had told her that the first work by Rune, called Beneath, was nearly completed.

She tells Rachel that this new persona felt very predatory and visceral to her, that it was not a nice persona at all, but a ruthless, cocky, cruel, dismissive type of persona.....and she believes that it has been a part of her for forever but never had a voice. From the entire encounter, Rachel writes, it was clear to see that even in her later years Harry was still an angry and bitter woman.

Phineas Q. Eldridge

He writes that he did move away with Marcelo, his Argentinian lover, but that they had returned to NYC after a brief time in Europe. Hearing that Harry's newest exhibit was opening he was curious to see what her latest and possibly greatest phallic finale. He had visited Harry who had told him everything and he is surprised that the new mask was Rune. He describes walking through the exhibit which is mazelike. Some of the elements included thick white walls, shadows, windows with window-boxes, and objects scattered about. He writes that the experience was disorienting and that unless the people walking through the room actually stopped long enough to note the changes in the area from the last, a person could not know whether they had circled back around and were in the same place or if they were farther into the maze. It was forcing people to pay attention to it. They emerge into the larger gallery relieved. He tries to get Harry to go have dinner with them, but she refuses and it upsets Phinny.

Analysis

Rachel Briefman

Rachel states that Harry's work with Rune took an emotional toll on her friend. The darkness that she had always suppressed, always figured was there was nearer to the surface when she was with Rune and this bothered her as she didn't want it to come out and hurt those she loved. Rachel is shown to be a supportive friend and disavows the later insinuations that Harry was delusional or out of her mind. The theme of Being Oneself is examined and demonstrated in this chapter as Harry and Rachel discuss the



fact that everyone has a dark side, but that most people let it surface in acceptable and constructive ways. Harry is unsure if she can do that.

Phineas Eldridge

Phineas returns to see the final work, but Harry avoids him. This avoidance can be seen as Harry's desire for Phinny, who represented her happier, more positive aspect, to remain removed from her dark side.

Discussion Question 1

Discuss Rachel's involvement with Harry at this point.

Discussion Question 2

Why is Phinny upset at Harry's treatment of him?

Discussion Question 3

Discuss the theme of Being Oneself.

Vocabulary

intensity, schema, irrational, oblivion, delusion, interaction, blinkered, contagion, accusation, gruesome, mutilated, beret



Richard Brickman/ William Burridge

Summary

Richard Brickman

The reader will recognize that this name is the one that Harry gave to her masked persona when she and Rune role played earlier. Adopting his persona, Harry has written a letter to the editor in an art journal. This has obviously been written while Harry was still alive and was delivered just prior to her death as one last final joke on the establishment, and as proof of her work.

'Richard' writes that he received a 65-page missive from Harry divulging the extent of her facade and the depth, breadth, and scope of her revelation of her three 'masks'. He goes on to say that it is a scientifically proven fact that people don't always notice alterations in their environment, and that there is simply much around a person that isn't readily perceived.

He writes that Harriet claims responsibility for creating the works that appeared in the solo exhibitions *The History of Western Art*, *The Suffocation Rooms*, and *Beneath*. She says that her motivation was that she wanted to see how the reception of her art changed depending on the persona of each mask. She explores the 'masculine enhancement effect'. She has called her experiment a fairy tale in three acts. In the second act, Brickman writes, she has taken on the fictional construct of race and sexuality as factors of perception. She goes on to write, Brickman states, that her vision was to insist on 'unfettered personas' and in this gain greater fluidity as an artist.

William Burridge

This is an interview that Hess did with William Burridge, an art dealer and a former associate of Felix Lord's. He says that nothing that he ever knew of Harriet during those earlier Felix days would have suggested that she had the ability to create any of the pieces. Hess also suggests that Richard Brickman was also Harriet. Burridge repeats a rumor that he heard which was that after Felix's death, Harriet had had a nervous breakdown and now was quite delusional.

Burridge had spoken with Rune as soon as he'd read the Brickman piece and Rune had denied it wholeheartedly. But, then, Burridge says, Rune always did like poking fun at authority and that this sort of 'scam' was just up his alley. Hess presses Burridge stating that *Beneath* was a work that was outside of the scope of anything that Rune had ever done up to that point and didn't that indicate that Harriet had done it. Burridge waves off the question stating that Rune was unpredictable and eccentric on a calm day, so there was no telling what he was capable of. In the end, Burridge refuses to believe that Harriet did all of the work she claims to have done by herself. At most, he suggests, she had a very minor role. He suggests that she certainly had the accumen to forge and



falsify her own journals, and thus, skewing the perception of the art world by offering up that seed of doubt about the works that she lays claim to.

Analysis

Richard Brickman

The tables continue to turn on Harry. Though Brickman's letter to the editor is included in the larger novel by the narrator, it is with the knowledge that Harry actually wrote it. Thus, the acclamations that are made don't really stand up to scrutiny, which is exactly what Rune will do in later chapters. It is interesting that Harry calls her group of male personas a fairy tale in three acts, when she has railed against all such established notions of male and female. Fairy tales imply that there is a happily ever after.

The theme of Art and the perception of art is discussed and demonstrated in this chapter. She suggests through Brickman's letter that art should be based on a sexless perception, that the art is better served when the viewer does not know if the artist is male or female. Thus, gender is a limiting factor in one truly trying to appreciate a work of art fully.

William Burridge

William is an art critic and this interview is included to provide the context necessary for the reader to see the entire betrayal as it has played out. When Harry is ready for her great unveiling, Rune is an unwilling participant in her fairy tale. Not only does Rune make Harry out to be a has been, or a wannabe artist, but he also suggests that in her old age she has lost her mind. He is assailing her on all fronts and Harry is devastated. The theme of being oneself takes an interesting interpretation, here, in that it would seem that Rune knew Harry better than she knew herself, meaning that he played her because he fully analyzed her, while she mistakenly believed Rune duped.

Discussion Question 1

What happens when Beneath is exhibited and Harry is ready to reveal herself as the true creator?

Discussion Question 2

Why does Rune betray Harry?

Discussion Question 3

Discuss how the theme of being oneself is explored in William Burridge.

Vocabulary

visual, constructionist, controversy, suspicion, installation, chic, dabbled, commodity, hoax, criticize



A Dispatch/Notebook D

Summary

A Dispatch from Elsewhere

This is a short story that Ethan has written. In first person and loaded with personal symbolism, he comments on the nature of dreams.

Dreams, he writes, are the language that the higher soul uses to instruct our consciousness.

Harriet Burden Notebook D

This short entry is a diatribe on the evening of the Beneath exhibit. Phinny and Marcelo run into her as she going to the exhibit and ask her to dinner, but she refuses. She is focused on her revenge on the art world, to make them see her, finally.

It is 2003 in the next entry in the notebook, and she admits that Rune shines very brightly and is so light, while she feels very earthbound and dark. She writes that she supposes that it is true that her anger and bitterness have made her a dark individual sipping on the sweet cup of revenge for many years.

Analysis

A Dispatch

It is interesting that Ethan writes about dreams, because it speaks to the inner life that he has, as opposed to the outward persona that he presents to the world. This is also true for Harry. If the reader will recall, still, these many years after his death, Harry has nightmares that Felix is not really dead. If Ethan's claims are true, then what are Harry's dreams trying to tell her?

Notebook D

Harry is beginning to see herself and what she has made herself because of her desire to make the artworld pay attention. She also feels the loss of so many things that she might have done but gave up so that she could focus on making her grand debut. And now, of course, that debut is a debacle and she's an even greater laughingstock that she was before. She is pictured as a doddering old woman suffering from early dementia. She is so angry that she lashes out at those around her, the darkness spilling out all around her.

The theme of alienation is also presented in this chapter as Harry speaks to Patrick L. at the opening of Beneath. He speaks to her of Felix and seems to view her as they all did



when Felix was still alive, as a non entity. He asks her how she manages to stay an outsider in the art world and his words, possibly meant to be kind, are received by Harry as a continued symptom of her aloneness and separateness. She is devastated.

Discussion Question 1

What are the nature of dreams?

Discussion Question 2

What has Harry finally come to realize about her pursuit of recognition over the last five years?

Discussion Question 3

What does the viewing public think of Harry now?

Vocabulary

dissonant, aggrieved, accosted, emanated, loquacious, trendy, vigorously, collapse



Harriet Burden Notebook O/Maisie Lord

Summary

Notebook O

Rune has called and wants Harry to come over to his place. She writes that she supposes that he wants to help plan the great reveal now that the entire exhibit has garnered such fabulous buzz. When she arrived at Rune's she writes, he is excited about a DVD that he's made for her.

He puts the disk into the player and she watches in horror as the film shows Rune seated on the couch with none other than Felix. They simply started at each other on the couch, then turn toward the camera, then back towards each other. Harry asks why Rune hadn't told her that he had known Felix. Rune suggests that they had been lovers. He takes out the key that he had offered to Maisie a year earlier and offers it to Harriet. She writes that the act was cruel and that he was cruel. She writes that Rune swears at her and calls her a sniveling little cunt. Harriet sits in silence that she says weighs down on her, pressing the very breath out of her.

Harriet writes that Rune had continued his rant, continuing to turn the verbal knife in the wound. He said that he knew that if the show had been opened under Harriet's name that it would have been considered a flop. He had said that she was nothing. Still a nothing. Rune had then placed his hands around her neck, seductively, and had almost strangled her. She writes that she had been so totally demoralized at that point that she hadn't thought to fight back. He moved his hands from her neck, stood back and then slapped her. He said that there would be no great reveal, that the work was officially his. He says that he had planted a rumor out there that Harriet was delusional, ill.

When she leaves and comes back to Red Hook, the Barometer comes to her and tells her that the Fallen Angel had burned her. He recognizes the burns. Harriet cries.

Maisie Lord

It is eight years since Harriet's death and Maisie reports that she has found another notebook of her mother's at Nantucket. She had gone there to clean out the house so that she and Ethan could sell it. This is when she found Notebook O and read it. She shares it with Ethan and at that point they agree that they should put all of the notebooks together to make one big book, which they would call The Blazing World.

Analysis

Notebook O



This is a pivotal chapter and spells the end for Harry. As with any tragedy the reader can see that this will not end well. Rune has finally revealed himself to be a dark and destructive force in Harry's life. With dramatic flair he discloses that he was Felix's lover many decades ago and that they had discussed Harry at length. This is how he knew exactly what games she was likely to try and play and why he played them better. He literally and figuratively suffocates and subjugates her at his apartment. Pressing down on the back of her neck is symbolic of a chain around her neck, binding her, pulling her down. Rune delights in her inability to move or say anything after his actions towards her. When he slaps her, and she only looks at him, he is assured that his dominance over her is complete.

In essence he has raped her muse in front of her and she is powerless to do anything about it. The author is stating that this side of the art world (the theme of art is demonstrated here) is one that is seductive, alluring, charming, glamorous, but one that ultimately can destroy and weigh one down. It can destroy a person's life if it is allowed to do so. The author is suggesting that any artist becoming a commercial artist needs to understand the delicate dance that happens in the art world and to learn the steps quickly.

Maisie Lord

This short chapter chronicles the fact that while cleaning out the vacation home Maisie has found another notebook. This one is the notebook that talks about what Rune did to her mother and Maisie shows it to her brother. They both vow to publish all of the notebooks so that the world will know the truth. Interestingly enough, one can see that if they are not careful, they will adopt their mother's desire for revenge.

Discussion Question 1

What does Rune do to Harry at his apartment in Notebook O?

Discussion Question 2

Why does Rune treat Harry as he does in Notebook O?

Discussion Question 3

What are Harriet's children's reactions to reading Notebook O?

Vocabulary

phoenix, co-conspirator, souvenir, repugnant, sniveling, insecure, orgasmic, mechanical



Bruno Kleinfeld/Timothy Hardwick

Summary

Bruno Kleinfeld

In this chapter Bruno talks about Harry's return to Red Hook after meeting with Rune. She tells him that she believes that she has struck a Faustian bargain. Learning that he knew Felix in an intimate way, Bruno writes, set up an air of paranoia. Later on in the week, Bruno writes, Harry started ranting and raving that there were four of her works that were missing from the studio. She blamed Rune and told Bruno that she believed he'd taken them as proof that he was the actual artist of Beneath.

Bruno writes that Harry believed that the Brickman article would vindicate her, but later they both learn that in a counter-move Rune has done an interview with a bigger magazine where he denounced Harry completely and brought into question Brickman's persona. Harry's reaction, Bruno writes, was violent and if he hadn't been there she would have smashed everything in their kitchen.

Though he regrets it, he says that at the time he told Harry 'I told you so' in regards to Rune. She called and left numerous rants on Rune's voicemail, which Bruno tried to talk her out of. She wrote a letter to another magazine, but they refused to print it. Once she calmed down, Bruno writes, she began to do some digging and realized that Rune had been planning this from the beginning, that all of the correspondences between them had been written in a way that could never prove that Harry was anything more than a supporter. Phinny came forward and gave an interview but very few read it.

Bruno writes that at that point he'd sat her down and asked her to walk away from it all. He'd asked her to run away with him once, and the offer was still good. She stalked out of the room and didn't come back. He writes that it was three months later when she spoke to him. She'd moved to the house in Nantucket.

One day he says that he looked out of his window while he was using the bathroom and he saw Harry walking on the street. He was about to run down to see her when he saw Rune running across the street towards her. They obviously have words, and Harry shoves Rune. Feeling protective, Bruno had run into the street. He got there just as Harry punched Rune in the face. She would have continued to beat Rune if Bruno hadn't pulled her off of him.

Afterwards Bruno takes her home and they reunite. She tells him that she feels lost. Bruno has finished his memoirs and sends it off to a publisher. He also writes that it was with no small amount of vindication that he learned that Rune had committed suicide on his latest work of art. The magazines speculated that he had suffered from depression.



Harry tells Bruno that she has learned that she has ovarian cancer. Harry writes that at the time they didn't know that she would have less than a year to live. He chronicles the whirlwind of cancer wards, chemo, pain, promises made, and Harry's death.

Timothy Hardwick

This is a magazine article that Hardwick published after Rune's death. He suggests that Houdini Smash, which was Rune's last work, anticipates the rise of an ego machine that is an artistic product that is conscious. The reader learns that Rune filmed the entire progress of his creation and at the end of the creative process he stared into the camera's lens and ceremoniously ingested some sort of pills. The writer suggests that perhaps he had only meant to pass out, then to reawaken as the last part of the performance art piece, but that he did not judge the proper amount needed. However, the writer also suggests that Rune knew exactly what he was doing.

Analysis

Bruno Kleinfeld

Bruno was there that night when Harry returned from Rune's apartment. He chronicles a slow and angry downward spiral. The anger that had festered and the bitterness that had sustained her over the last ten years were still eating away at her, and now, her health would literally parallel her mental anguish.

It is highly notable that the type of cancer that she gets affects her female reproductive organs. The very physical essence of what made her female are removed from her and she is as close to androgynous as she can be. She realizes the folly of her last five years and longs to have them back, to have experienced the joy that she might have felt if she had only not been seduced by art. The theme of art is demonstrated in this chapter, and as discussed earlier, is shown to not only be inspirational, but destructive as well. She let it consume her every thought and then, later, it consumed her.

Gender as a theme is also demonstrated in this chapter, as Harry is no longer either one sex or another, or so she writes. However, her perspectives toward art haven't changed, and thus she realizes that her notion that the gender of a person clouds a person's perception of art must be adjusted.

Timothy Hardwick

The reader learns that Rune most likely killed himself on his latest project, Houdini Smash. This is also a continuation of the destructive nature of art when an artist allows it to totally consume him or her. At some point, both Rune and Harry were no longer being themselves (another theme in the novel) and started being whom they thought they should be, or would be in their own minds if only they could do XYZ. However, when this doesn't play out for either of them, the devastation is complete.



One can also suggest that Rune wasn't as separated from Harry as he would have had her believe. Learning what the reader does about his early childhood and hearing from his sister, Kirsten, it is likely that Rune had mother issues and possibly used Harry as a surrogate in order to release some pent up anger he still harbored for his own mother and her drinking habits.

Discussion Question 1

Discuss the irony of Harry's cancer.

Discussion Question 2

What has Harry come to decide about her last five years?

Discussion Question 3

Discuss Rune's death.

Vocabulary

persuasively, dominant, narrative, indistinguishable, representational, replicated, penetrate, radically, potentiality, animate



Kirsten Larsen Smith/Harriet Burden Notebook U

Summary

Kirsten Larsen Smith

Kirsten is Rune's sister and she is interviewed by Hess. This chapter is a transcription of that interview. Hess asks her about her brother's death. She says that now, eight years after his death, she's ready to set the record straight on a number of things because of Oswald Case's book on her brother. First, she says, he was never underprivileged. She also takes exception to the fact that Oswald Case suggested that as a celebrity Rune was no longer responsible for being a moral person. She says that when they were younger their mother had a drinking problem and Rune felt responsible for taking care of her when she was out of it.

This made Rune angry and so he started shoplifting, Kirsten says. So, she tells Hess, there was no way that Rune was ever a saint. She also takes exception to Case's claim that all of Rune's work was impersonal, but Kirsten knows that the underlying motivation and inspiration for his first showing, *The Banality of Glamour* that he was remembering Kirsten's accident that happened when she was eleven and had her face sliced open. She says that when their mother passed away they were still just teenagers.

Later, their father would die and Rune had a dramatic personality change, the reader learns. He went from being a fun loving, caring brother to a darker more sinister snob. He was proscribed medicine for his depression but it seemed to bring out the darker side of him more, Kristen shares. She says that he used to try and create the worst scenarios just to shock Kirsten. Before he left her apartment, where he'd been staying, he trashed the whole thing.

Notebook U

In this notebook Harry is still plotting and planning to get back at Rune for claiming her work. She speaks about Ethan writing another short story that she finds brilliant but when she calls him to discuss it, he is furious at her for not getting the meaning at all. Meanwhile, her granddaughter, Aven, is exhibiting strange behavior and while Harry thinks it is quite nice, her parents are concerned. Aven has had her hair cut short, but wanted to have a mohawk. Letting her cut it short was the compromise. Harry doesn't say anything because she knows that they will never suppress Aven the way Harry was suppressed.

She has come to the conclusion that the fallen angel that Barometer talks about (whose real name the reader learns is Alan) is none other than Rune. She says that the night



Rune had attacked her she'd been too shaken up to hear what he told her. Now, in reflection she understands that in his mind he was trying to tell her that it was Rune.

Analysis

Kirsten

The reader learns more about Rune's past and taken as a whole inclusion within the larger work, was included by the narrator to support the idea that he did not create Beneath, that Harriet did. The personality change that Rune experienced after his father's death is the same personality that Harry saw the night he accosted her in his apartment. The reader also is given insight into a more vulnerable Rune, one that had compassion and love for his sister. However, later, when he has his personality changes, she breaks off all contact with him. Symbolically, Kirsten is the best part of Rune, and by continually horrifying her and subjecting her to sordid ideas and notions, she leaves him forever, thus suggesting that all human decency left Rune at that time.

Notebook U

Sadly, Harry, in this notebook doesn't have the insight and self discovery that will come later. She is determined to vindicate herself before her death.

Discussion Question 1

Discuss Kirsten's character and what she reveals about Rune.

Discussion Question 2

What does including the discussion about Aven's hair tell the reader about Harry's granddaughter?

Discussion Question 3

Discuss Kirsten as a symbolic foil for Rune.

Vocabulary

misrepresented, senile, persnickety, cultivated, myths, exaggerations, perverted, portrayed, pathetic, shatter



Notebook O/Notebook D

Summary

Notebook O

In this chapter Harry has noticed that her stomach is bloated even though overall she is thin. She does not feel well, and she is upset that she's alienated almost everyone around her. She laments the fight that made her walk away from Bruno and she feels old, fat, and alone. She reads *Paradise Lost* and tries to forget her problems, but they won't stay silent. She mourns for Bruno to be back in her life again.

Notebook D

Finally, Harry writes, Rune has agreed to speak with her. After all of the phone calls and emails, he agreed to come to Red Hook to see her at the warehouse. The reader is able to piece together this chapter with other notebooks and reports. This is the scene where Rune meets her on the street outside of the warehouse and Bruno sees them. This is where he rushes down to stop the ensuing street fight, but before he can get there Harry had decked Rune. She writes that her hand really hurts and is swollen but that since Bruno found her again she is okay. She writes that he takes care of her and makes her chicken soup.

The next day she writes that both she and Bruno have read that Rune is dead. She is angry because his final piece, called *Houdini Smash* has stolen bits and pieces from *Beneath* and made it look even more like it was his work all along. By dying he has forever sealed the argument. A beautiful death. She remembers them discussing this and thinks that Rune did mean to kill himself after all.

Analysis

Notebook O

In this notebook Harry doesn't know that she has ovarian cancer. She's aware that she has alienated herself from Bruno and others that cared for her because of her disgust and hysteria over Rune. She feels the loss of her work deeply and keenly, and just as strongly she feels the loss of all of her support structures. In this short passage she feels very much alone and the theme of alienation is demonstrated.

Notebook D

This passage jumps back in time to the meeting with Rune where he almost strangles her. She has the the incident recorded in several notebooks as if she is attempting to digest it from different perspectives. In this incident, she meets Rune in the street because he has refused to meet with her, answer her calls or emails. She sees him in



the street and decks him. Symbolically, Rune is her dark muse and the specter of Felix. He represents everything she's been railing against in the art world. When she sees him in the street she punches him, and in essence is continuing her fight against a male dominated industry that plays dirty in order to suppress brilliant artists.

Discussion Question 1

Why does Harry punch Rune in the street?

Discussion Question 2

Discuss the themes of alienation in Notebook O.

Discussion Question 3

How does her emails, phone calls, and attack on Rune only further Rune's claims?

Vocabulary

snitch, register, doodads, vague, abdominal, wrinkled, chide, dreadful, horrified, inundated, collide



Harriet Burden Notebook T/Sweet Autumn Pinkney

Summary

Harriet Burden Notebook T

This chapter chronicles Harry's discovery of her cancer. She discusses hearing the diagnosis, her returning home to Bruno, then going through the first of several surgeries. She is in intense pain and writes about the various doctors that come in. She is looking forward to Dr. F, her long time psychiatrist, who is coming to see her later. She writes that it is an awful thing to think that you've been attacked from within.

The fact that all of her female reproductive organs have now been removed seems ironic to her since she writes that she has been ambivalent toward them all along. She writes that birth, like illness, and like death is not something that one wills into existence, but that it happens when it will. A person's will or ego have nothing to do with it.

A later entry shows that she has returned home to the warehouse and that she wants to get back to work. Her body will not allow her to do so, however, and she rails against the injustice. She is not ready to die. Harry determines not to go quietly at all. She writes that dying is not so simple as it might seem. A social worker comes to the apartment and Harry gives her grief for trying to tell her how to die well. She does plan her own funeral, however. She says that her body has a smell about it, she writes that it is most likely the smell of death and dying.

She writes of speaking kindly to Bruno, of holding him one more time as he wept on her ample bosoms. She says it is harder to write anything down. Her former doctor, Dr. F calls. She writes of the sound of sorrow in his voice, and Harry realizes that he did love her as a friend. Rachel comes to visit and she asks Maisie to take Rachel in to look at her colossus woman sculpture. Ethan comes and tells her stories and she is proud of him.

A whole host of people keep dropping by to say hello....and goodbye to Harry. Autumn comes by and tries to do some healing rituals but Harry laughs, which hurts.

Sweet Autumn Pinkney

In this section, the last section in the book, the reader sees and experiences Harry's last days before she dies. Many people still come by to see her. Autumn has set up camp in the warehouse and is administering his new age ministrations to all of them. He's brought his little dog, Kali, who seems to help Aven, in particularly deal with her grandmother's impending departure. At one point, near the end, she looks at Aven with the utmost of clarity and tells her to fight for herself, and to never let anyone push her around. Aven promised.



Bruno refused to leave her side and Autumn replies that he was a special man with a special gift, which was being one of the only people on the planet who truly knew how to deeply love and appreciate Harry. Later, after Harry dies, Autumn returns to the studio to see the pieces of art before Ethan and Maisie move them into storage. There is the colossus woman, named The Blazing World. Autumn, who doesn't really like modern art, writes that out of respect he approached the work and had an immediate feeling that it was sacred. He writes that he went down on his knees and that when he did that he could see that the work was made up of all these small compartments, that when opened had all of these little people in them doing things. In the middle he finds a woman that looks like Harry and he writes that it glowed purple.

Analysis

Notebook T

Harry is dying in this chapter. If one were to take Harry as a metaphorical symbol of the artist, then her pursuit of recognition has cost her, her life. And, ironically, like many artists, she will not be recognized during her own lifetime. She's allowed things to eat away at her humanity until she almost has had nothing left. Certainly she has traded away and devalued her femaleness, and as a result, she has developed Ovarian cancer. The author seems to be suggesting that the proper perspective needs to be placed on anything that one pursues with passion, and that the proper motives are sometimes still not enough to gain perspective and to actually live life.

Harry had the chance to live the life that she had been denied, with a man that loved her and the money and health to enjoy going wherever in the world she chose. Instead, she embraced the idea of change and of being the spearhead of that change. What she has realized is that people in established circles do not embrace or welcome change and will fight against it at any cost.

Sweet Autumn Pinkney

This is the final inclusion in the work and focuses on people finally seeing Harry's work and knowing that it was hers, truly. The end of the book states that several years after her death, her work was exhibited in a prestigious gallery in Manhattan. She got what she wanted, but wasn't alive to see it happen.

Discussion Question 1

Discuss Harry as the metaphorical symbol of every artist and their relationship to the art world.



Discussion Question 2

How is Harry's story a cautionary tale for anyone who has a passion they want to pursue?

Discussion Question 3

How is Harry's story a discussion of self discovery?

Vocabulary

backsliding, karma, sacral, plight, toxins, gorge, luminous, clematis



Characters

Harriet 'Harry' Burden

Harriet seems obsessively drawn to fantasize about ways to get back at the establishment, in particular those that in her mind hold back women, or are prejudiced against them. She is clearly disgruntled, bitter, and frustrated for the first part of her life (until she is 62). However, once her husband dies, she comes into her own.

Harriet is often described in conflicting terms by those interviewed by Hess. Some report that in her earlier years she resembled a figure from a painting, a picturesque woman, full bodied, and sensual. In her early days, she becomes reclusive and shy, clearly supporting her husband's career and focusing on being a nurturing mother. Her art career dies. However, her ambitions don't.

In later years, Harriet, nicknamed Harry, often intimidated those around her, and those she just met. She was extremely tall for a woman, with large breasts, large opinions, and a highly intelligent mind. She was well read and consumed vast volumes on hefty subjects such as philosophy and science.

She is consumed with making her place in the art world, and moreover, to shed light on the prejudice against female creative works by the general public. This is one of her greatest motivations to create three works of art, use three different men as the fronts, which she calls Masks, and to thumb her nose at the art world for their pretentious ways.

Aven

Aven is Maisie's daughter, and Harriet's granddaughter. Aven, from early on in the novel, begins to exhibit many of her grandmother's characteristics, including developing an imaginary friend named, Radish. This imaginary friend lives in her throat and says all sorts of things that Aven would never say.

Harry recognizes what is going on and supports Aven's imaginary friend, much in the same way her own mother had supported her imaginary friend. Later on, the reader sees Aven as an older child, exploring her grandmother's art, and unlike many of the adults around her, immediately understands what it means. Her decision to cut her hair short intrigues her grandmother, and the reader learns that Aven had wanted to get a mohawk but that her parents had been afraid that she would be teased at school. The compromise had been to cut it extremely short. Harry realizes that some part of her will live on in Aven.

On her deathbed, Harry implores Aven to never give up fighting, to stand up for herself always, and to be whomever she decides to be without fear. Aven agrees.



Oscar

Maisie's husband, Oscar, does not make an appearance, but the reader learns that he holds a good job and loves Maisie and Aven completely.

Ethan

Ethan is the protagonist's son who calls the fetish dolls the maternal monsters, or pater horribilis. He is an author and writes for an obscure underground magazine. He often becomes upset with his mother for her antics, as he is a rule keeper. He does not like it when routine and order are disrupted, which makes him much like his father, Felix. However, unlike Felix, Ethan does not have a cruel streak and is defensive of his mother.

Maisie

Maisie is the protagonist's daughter. She is bubbly and vivacious and loves to talk. She is a producer and filmmaker. She once featured a discovered artist called the Barometer who was living with Harriet. Maisie loves her mother completely and is one of the first that agrees to the interviews with Hess. She confesses that she knew little about Felix's work or where he disappeared to all of those times. To her he was this wonderful, if not distant, man.

She reports to Hess that she knew that her parents didn't really love one another, though.

Dr. Rachel Briefman

This is the protagonist's best friend. She is also a psychologist. In one of her interviews with Hess she adamantly defends Harry's mental state, claiming that Rune was the sociopathic person. She also talks heatedly about the art world and its continued suppression and repression of great works of art, simply because they are perceived as somehow less because they are created by women.

Bruno Kleinfeld

In his sixties with basset hound cheeks, Bruno becomes a friend and more to Harry. She loves him and he loves her ferociously, but Harry realizes that even Bruno, as much as he loves her, doesn't really 'get' her. He is with her when she dies and provides a great deal of insight for Hess in a wide series of interviews. The reader learns that it is Harry's support and urging that motivates him to create a larger body of work, a novel, which he eventually has published. He offers readers a different, softer, more vulnerable view of Harriet.



Phineas Q. Eldridge

Phineas is another one of Harry's artists in residence. He is also one of Harry's 'masks'. He is mulatto and gay. Originally from Richmond Virginia, he is a performance artist. He used to create elaborate sets in his mind for a world that he created when he was a boy, called Baaltamar.

Phinny is one of the three 'masks' that Harry uses for her statement. Unlike the other two, however, Phinny does not bear her any hard feelings or malice when he enjoys the acclaim, and then later must confess to not being the actual artist. As a gay man, and an ethnic minority, he understands full well why Harry did what she did and he supports the actions she took to make her point. He writes several articles that he submits to art journals after Harry's death in order to prove that Harry did create the works she was now claiming.

Oswald Case

A self aggrandizing art journalist and gossip columnist, Case refuses to accept that he, along with many other notable art critics, have been duped. He goes to a great deal of effort to prove that he was not fooled and that Harriet was just a frustrated artist that didn't have the talent to make it in the real world. He is a fan of Rune's work, and continues to suggest that Harriet was the fraud that Rune said she was.

Anton Tish

Anton is a tall, skinny young man, in his early twenties. He has a significant nose and searching eyes. Harry met him at Sunnys. Barometer calls him 'table'. He would be the first male persona that Harry 'adopts' and uses for her own purposes. Anton goes along with it to poke fun at the establishment, however, afterwards he feels cheated. Anton realizes that in adopting Harry's persona that he's given up on his own artistic dreams. He takes the money that they made together, with her blessing, and leaves to travel the world, hoping to regain his identity.

Rune

Rune Larsen is Harriet Burden's last 'mask' or front man for her art work. They meet at the second mask's exhibition (Phinny) where he corners Harriet's daughter, Maisie outside when they step out for a smoke. He frightens her with his intensity and though he tells her it is just a joke, she didn't find it funny at all. Later, he will meet and speak with Harriet and she finds him delightfully intelligent. For the first time she writes that someone actually 'gets' her, and can speak on her intellectual level. He agrees to be her last front man and they create a work called, Beneath.



It is only after the work has been unveiled that Rune's dark nature begins to surface. When Harriet is ready for the 'big reveal'; her time to tell the art world that she is the creator of the art pieces, Rune refuses to go along with it. He makes Harriet to look like a delusional old woman. He adds insult to injury when he tells her that he and Harriet's former husband, Felix, had been lovers. Through interviews with Rune's sister, Kirsten, the reader learns that Rune was very dark natured and that he had once drown a bunch of kittens at their home. He had also done many sadistic and cruel things over the years.

Rune dies by acting as one of the final pieces in his work of art called Houdini Smash, when he took too many pills and overdosed.

Felix Lord

Felix Lord was Harriet Burden's husband for many years. He met her at an art exhibit and shortly thereafter married her. From that point on Harriet faded into her husband's shadow for most of their marriage. Felix was a extremely polished and cultured individual. He is Korean-American and his mother never fully accepts Harriet into the family.

Felix is unfaithful to Harry in the marriage almost from the very beginning, indulging every fetish and sexual whim that occurred to him. When Harriet confronts him with a note from one of his lovers, he doesn't even bother to deny it, shutting her down completely. He is extremely connected in the art world, and wealthy. Harriet is swallowed up by the art machine and Felix allows it to happen. He is in a position to have helped his wife make it in the art world, and for reasons the reader is never given, opts to squash all artistic tendencies and to undermine her very self esteem as a person.

The reader meets Harriet well after Felix's death, but his shadow and ghost still seem to haunt Harriet. There are more than twenty years difference in their ages. His last name, Lord, is another indication of his complete domination of Harry's life.

April Rain

Harriet invites her to live at Red Hook when she learns that April is homeless. She is tiny, with delicate features, and sports bird tattoos on her lower arms. She only stays with Harry for a week or so after she runs into an old boyfriend that gives her a place to stay.

Edgar Holloway III

A school friend of Ethan's, Edgar helps Harriet with the various construction projects at Red Hook. He is a stocky boy with rock and roll aspirations. Harry describes him as strong, docile, and a quick study.



Barometer

This is the second artist in residence that Harriet takes in. He is quiet and keeps to himself, except when Harry needs help. He had been in a mental institution. He can tell the weather by the sinus condition that he has. He is also the one that tells Harry about the fallen angel that keeps sneaking into the warehouse. Later, Harry realizes that this is the Barometer's way of telling her that Rune has been sneaking into the warehouse.

Autumn Pinkney

Sweet Autumn Pinkney is a new age practitioner and friend of Phinny's. He likes to clear auras and is drawn to artists. When he is visiting Phinny at the warehouse he meets Harriet for the first time and is struck by the force of her aura, which he says is vibrantly red. Later, when Harriet is on her deathbed, Autumn comes to stay at the warehouse and eases her passing, as well as offering consideration and care, support, for the family who are devastated by their loss.

Dr. Adam Fertig

Dr. Adam Fertig, or Dr. F as Harry calls him in her notebooks, is a silent supporter throughout the years. The reader does not get to read any interviews with Dr. F and the reader is only privy to the conversations between him and Harriet in Harry's notebooks. The reader does get to understand that Dr. F genuinely cares about Harry and has compassion for the scared and lonely little girl who learned that her erudite professor father, never wanted her.

Symbols and Symbolism

Harriet's Hair

At the beginning of the novel the reader learns that Harriet was required by Felix to keep her hair cut short. Her natural hair was long, wavy, and wild, which Felix did not like. To make him happy, Harriet willingly cuts her hair. However, when Felix dies she begins to let it grow out, and later on even takes to wearing outlandish hats to bring even more attention to her hair.

As a symbol, then, Harriet's Hair is an outward sign of her inward change. Her true self is coming forward in all of its wild abandon and she will never cut it back or reshape it again.

The Empathy Box

The Empathy boxes are tiny dioramas that incorporate mirrors so that the perspective offered varies with where the viewer stands. Harriet constructed these to reiterate the plight of the woman artist, whose view in the art world has been skewed, distorted, fragmented, and not truly reflected as it should be. She calls them the empathy boxes not only because she is speaking directly to her own artist self but to all those whose lives are never truly seen or appreciated.

Fetish Dolls

At the beginning of the novel, as a creative therapy for herself after the death of her husband, Harriet creates a large series of figures, dolls, and fetishes that all seem to resemble a phallic object, or her father, or Felix. She later adds either cold or warmth as an element to the figures, symbolizing the fact that her father, and then Felix, ran either cold or hot, and were never at a temperature to be endured for long.

The Naked Venus

The History of the Western World was the first exhibit that Harry created using a persona, Anton Tish. This exhibit had a reclining venus, and along her body at various intervals were phrases and scraps of paper, representative labels attached to the body. Surrounding the body were many empathy boxes of varying sizes and shapes. It was met with great acclaim.



Mirrors

There are frequent references to mirrors in the book, most notably their inclusion into the empathy boxes. In each instance, mirrors are used as a point of contact with the viewer, to offer them a different perspective, or to engage the viewer in self examination from a different angle. The mirrors are a physical representation of Harry's desire for everyone to really see themselves for who they are.

Journals

Harriet begins keeping journals shortly after her husband's death. It is these journals that Hess uses to construct the greater part of the book called *The Blazing World*. The journals chronicle the bulk of Harriet Burden's creative cycle and offers insight into the tortured mind of a creative force that was never allowed out to play.

The journals are a connection between Harriet, her family, and those who would later read what was in them.

The Warehouse

The warehouse in Red Hook is not only Burden's studio and living space, but it was, in large part, representative of her body. She routinely took in people who were disenfranchised, needy, and talented. Just as she took them into her house, she took them into her life and heart as well. A warehouse by definition is a place where things are kept that are important until they can be released into the public, and this is just what Burden did with her life and her work.

In large part, the warehouse 'birthed' many of the artists and personalities that came through its doors.

The Suffocation Exhibit

This was the exhibit that Harriet did using Phineas Q. Eldridge as the 'mask'. In this work the viewer walked through a succession of rooms, all of them kitchens, which were representative of the room where women were supposed to be relegated. However, each successive kitchen grows increasingly smaller and warmer. Also included in each kitchen is a box with a figure peering out. In each kitchen the figure is able to push the top of the box further open until, in the last kitchen the figure is shown emerging from the box. The figure, itself, is androgynous.

The symbolism in this was multiple and layered. Not only was Harry making a statement about the repressive and restrictive domain that women were confined to, but she is also overlapping that with sexuality, indicating that being bound by a tradition that kept women in the kitchen, unseen and unheard is the same as being gay and never being



able to love openly or freely. The idea of being suffocated is reinforced with the shrinking rooms, which also carry the message of limits and boundaries. In the last kitchen, the figure, who is at once sexless and both sexes, is freed from the box, but the room is no bigger than a closet. What Harry is saying with this is that women were granted access to the art world, but within a narrowly confined area than that offered to male artists. Literally, women and homosexuals came out of the closet but then the boundaries were so narrow that there was no where to turn or go.

Felix the Cat Letter

Felix Lord, Harry's husband, was openly promiscuous in his marriage. This was made clear to Harry when she discovered a letter that was addressed to Felix, the Cat. She read the note and it said that a couple were looking forward to his visit soon. There were keys to some apartment that was their rendezvous. She confronted Felix about it, but he merely patted her on the head condescendingly and walked out of the door.

Hess's Name

The name that Hustvedt chooses for her fictitious narrator is I.V. Hess. This is ironic and is thought to be based on the Hess scale that is used to determine the amount of brain damage that is done to someone after a stroke, which is what Felix dies from.

The Blazing World/Colossus Woman

There are three representations and uses of the title The Blazing World. The first instance is when Harry is learning about Margaret Cavendish from the 17th Century. Harry is fascinated with this woman that was so intelligent and talented that she refused to be silenced. One of Cavendish's works, a novel, was called The Blazing World.

Secondly, The Blazing World is used as a title for a work that Harry creates on her own after she reveals her involvement in the three installment pieces. The Blazing World is a large grotesque woman with small compartments built into her body. The viewer is encouraged to peer into her body where small mirrors and dioramas are observable.

Lastly, Harry calls herself The Blazing World and at the end, when she has died, and her children stand to observe The Blazing World, they understand that the large colossus woman is their mother.

The Beneath

The Beneath is the work that Rune fronted for Harry. After it was presented, a series of rooms with mirrors, windows, windowboxes, all presented within a maze and peep holes. The entire work was to show how perspective could be skewed depending on one's view and perspective. Ultimately, Harry was making a commentary on how



celebrity influences interpretation of the value of a work of art. However, this work backfires on her when Rune refuses to acknowledge her involvement or that he was the front man for her. She is devastated by this work.

Houdini Smash

Houdini Smash is Rune's work that he created after Beneath. He took many elements from Harry's work, Beneath, and incorporated it into this work in order to validate his claim to Beneath and to further discredit Harry. He ends up dying in the performance portion of the piece. Many argued about whether his death was suicide or an unfortunate accident. Either way, as Harry says, it was a beautiful death.

Settings

Red Hook

Where Harriet moves after Felix dies. This is a large warehouse. She lives on the top floor and keeps the entire bottom floor as a studio. She constantly has artists in residence that live and create there.

Sunny's Bar

This is a small neighborhood bar that isn't far from Red Hook. Harriet likes to go there because there are a lot of other artists that frequent the place.

Gallery One

This is where Harriet's first work is exhibited under Anton Tish's name.

Gallery Two

This is the gallery where Phinny's work, *The Suffocation Room*, was exhibited. It was much bigger than the previous gallery.

Gallery Three

This gallery was the largest one of the three galleries that Harry's art would be exhibited in. Her last work, *Beneath*, attributed to Rune until the publication of Hess's book, was shown there to high acclaim.



Themes and Motifs

Gender

The theme of Gender is dominant throughout the entire novel and is alluded to in nearly every chapter. There are also many ways that the author offers the concept of gender.

First, there is the concept of gender as a limiting factor. This is evidenced by Harry's treatment by the art world prior to her involvement with Felix, and then later after she marries Felix. Because she is female, her work is not credited with the same acclaim that would have been afforded a male artist presenting the same work. Secondly, she was relegated to a secondary citizen by Felix when they married. In order to present a good impression to the world, in which image is everything, she was expected to be the perfect hostess, mother, and wife. She did present this 'mask' to the world for decades but began to cast off this limited way of living when she began to see the psychoanalyst, Dr. F. The work that Harry does with Anton, *The History of the Western World*, is a direct commentary on women as viewed in the art world and as used/abused by the masses.

Next, there is the way that gender is addressed through the character of Phineas Q. Eldridge. As a gay man, Phinny has dealt with his own share of gender bias. Because his sexuality is not recognized as legitimate, he is relegated to the underground and the backseats in the art world. However, Harry turns this around for him with the work, *The Suffocation Room*. Then, the art crowd become gender blind and don't care that he's gay, in fact, embracing the fact that he is different and 'courageous'.

Lastly, there is the notion that gender is only a limiting factor if one allows it to be. While Harry has become embittered by the fact that she's a woman and as such not viewed as the same as a man, her daughter and her granddaughter are not tainted by this embittered view. Given Harry's upbringing, with an emotionally distant father, who admitted to her at an early age that he did not want her, and then her marriage to an equally domineering and emotionally cruel man, it is no wonder that her perception of the world as a battlefield involved gender. All of the perpetrators of pain and misery in her life have been male. Rune continues this legacy.

Lastly, Hustvedt offers an alternative view of gender. Through the character of Phinny and Autumn, two gay men, as well as Harry, the author offers the suggestion that the body is a vehicle (as evidenced by Harry's work, *The Blazing World*), and can be as magnificent as the spirit of the person driving it. It can make you larger than life and memorable; limited only by one's own perception of those around them.

Race

The theme of Race is introduced primarily through the character and work of Phineas (Phinny). He is gay, but he is also multiracial, so he faced prejudice on many fronts. As a black man he told Harry that he found himself limited in the showings and venues that



he would be granted. As a performance artist many in the art community were fearful that he would be too limited in his presentation. However, as Phinny will go on to show, the only ones who were limited were the art community who continued to try and place labels on someone based on their race.

Harry uses the notion of Race as well as sexuality in the work she creates for Phinny called The Suffocation Room. In this piece the viewer is asked to reevaluate what it is that they are seeing and to feel the same constriction and feeling of restriction that a person may feel because of their race, age, or sexual orientation. With Phinny, Harry was able to present the double message of the damage that labels can have on someone.

It is notable that throughout the work those 'strays' that Maisie calls the artists that come to live with Harry are usually the disenfranchised, who like herself, were relegated to small 'boxes' with their work or their lives. Either because they were too young, too old, too black, too white, too disabled, these castaways from society found a home at Harry's and she was able to work their disquiet into her work, ultimately showing that when labels such as Race enter into the equation that they stifle and suffocate what is truly beautiful about it all.

Art

Art is both a motif and a theme that plays throughout the entire novel. Because the novel is set against the backdrop of the art world, it is inevitable that there should be a theme and overall message about art. There are many messages suggested in regard to art.

First, there is the suggestion that beauty is illusory and that it is truly in the eye of the beholder. The biases, belief system, and even the gender of a person will influence the experience that a person has with the work of art. The author seems to be suggesting that there should be a way for art to remain androgynous, so that gender and the artist's life need not color the experience of the work, itself.

Next, there is the message that art can be both a healing medium, or a destructive force. The reader sees this exemplified in many places, but most notably in Harry's first collection of phallic fetish dolls. She creates these to reclaim her lost and damaged artist that had been suppressed and denigrated for many years. It is after this exploration that Harry begins to let her hair grow back out to its longer length instead of the close cropped style that Felix had insisted on.

Then, there is the opposite side of the coin: art as destructive force. Rune uses the art to drive home the point that he has bested Harry at her own game, using information that he gained from Felix in order to wound her quickly and deeply. In this instance, his art becomes the trap that Harry had been attempting to escape. As a result, Harry's world falls apart and she shortly becomes terminally ill.



Lastly, art is seen to be transcendent. This is exemplified when Harry's works are finally given a showing at a prestigious gallery after her death. The narrator tells the reader that the works have gone on to inspire others and that Harry's legacy through her work and her messages have inspired many.

Being Oneself

The theme of Being Oneself is also a dominant theme throughout the novel, *The Blazing World*, in particular because Harriet Burden, the protagonist, hasn't been allowed to be herself for most of her life.

As a child, Harriet was told that she needed to act a certain way. Despite the fact that she wanted to be like many of the other girls, she was expected as the child of a professor and a Jew that she had rules that needed to be followed. Luckily she found a girl, Rachel, who was also in a similar situation, and so they were both able to offer comfort to each other when they were not allowed to dress, act, or participate in activities that others enjoyed. They were the good girls and the academicians that their parents wanted them to be.

Then, when Harriet married she was once again relegated to a role that was thrust upon her. At this point in her life, after having lived as a spurned and neglected wife, and a mother to two young children, her inner self rebelled and she could no longer hold food down. It was as if all of the suppressed greatness that wanted to be heard was refusing to stay down any longer. Symbolically, she was rebelling against the life she was being forced to live and the role she was forced to play. Her career as an artist had been squashed and her new identity limited to just the title of wife and mother.

When Harriet breaks free of Felix, through his own death, she returns back to who she was all along. She tells Rachel during a lunch that she woke up to find that the story of her life was not her story at all, but some impostor's and that she had been telling the wrong story for way too many years. The rest of the novel focuses on Harry's reawakening and her reaction and outcry against so many years of suppression and repression. The author uses this as a cautionary tale to show that when someone is not true to themselves and allows others to define them, then ultimately, it can lead to a disastrous and unhappy life.

Alienation

In *The Blazing World*, Harriet, the protagonist, experiences alienation and isolation in many forms. Alienation continues to haunt her throughout the novel.

First, there is the alienation that began for Harry at an early age. She learns, when she is eight years old that her father never wanted her. She overheard a conversation between her mother and someone else, and learned that when her mother was pregnant with her, that her father had been very angry. Though her mother had, had several miscarriages before, now that a pregnancy was secured and healthy, he was



not happy. Harry internalizes that he is unhappy with her because she was born a girl and not a boy to carry on the name. This part of Harry's life is spent trying to gain her father's approval, either through her grades and school achievements, or by making a name for herself in the art world. At her first showing, he was not pleased at her work and belittled it. Harry was devastated.

Next, Harry experiences alienation in her marriage. Just as she was born into a family where the central male figure was aloof and emotionally distant and cold, she now finds herself in a marriage that is equally so. Felix Lord courts her, then once they are married, keeps her as a trophy wife, putting an effective end to her art career. As an art dealer he was ideally situated to find dealers for her work, but because he didn't want his image to seem nepotistic, he refused to help her. She masked her hurt by pouring herself into being a good wife and spouse, to please Felix, in much the same way that she did with her father, and thus, effectively, alienating herself from who she truly was and the art community.

Lastly, after Felix's death, even when she reinvents herself and has bravely stepped forward to claim all of the work from her masks, Harry is alienated by the art community because they cannot accept this new definition of Harriet Burden. As her name suggests, she carries the burden of her alienation with her and is never able to get out from under it while she is still living.

Styles

Point of View

The Point of View in Hustvedt's novel is primarily first person, as told from Harriet's own voice and thoughts via her journals. However, there are sections where Harriet breaks into third person, as if she were chastising a child, and in other places where an interview or magazine article are included, then those are in third person. As an overall collection, there is a silent Narrator, called I.V. Hess who was the one that put together and edited the collection of materials to form the book. In this instance, then, it is an implied second person, which makes the entire novel a bit jarring.

Language and Meaning

The language utilized within the novel is often of an extremely advanced lexicon, which is in keeping with Harriet Burden's extreme intelligence. Had this character ever been tested, it is assured that she would have had a seat at the MENSA table. As such, often her diatribes along philosophical or psychological/neurological lines are often so specific and specialized that unless the reader has a background in that area, the discussion loses its meaning. However, it should be noted that this is not a problem, because in this context, the actual author, Hustvedt, meant for that to be the effect. Harriet was constantly talking over people's heads, and so when she writes, she is often doing the same thing. Hustvedt does this for effect, rather than to annoy the reader.

Likewise, the author uses language to set the tone and provide characterization for The Barometer (Alan Dudek) who is mentally ill. His conversations and interviews are consistently jumbled and jarring, but also coherent and symbolic. If one reads Barometer's sentences for literal meaning, then the reader may be as overwhelmed as most were when meeting him. However, if one reads the conversations symbolically, things begin to make some semblance of cohesion and coherence.

Structure

The entire novel is comprised of 45 different sections, each of them focused on discovering the life and times, and mindset of Harriet Burden. The use of her journals is crucial to the development of the book, and Hustvedt is careful to only place a small amount of an excerpt for the reader to view, so that the story of Harriet's life unfolds as a recognizable timeline. However, there are times when certain notebooks are introduced which takes the reader back a few days before the last entry, or jumps them forward. This is usually to set the tone or pretext for some event that takes place.

Additionally, providing information from a wide variety of people who 'knew' Harriet Burden, as well as including magazine interviews with those who were prominent in her life, give the reader an almost omniscient view of the protagonist, without having to be

written in third person. This is a brilliant technique and offers a more rounded view of the protagonist and the tragedy that unfolds.



Quotes

Life is walking tiptoe over land mines. We never know what's coming and, if you want my opinion, we don't have a good grip on what's behind us either.

-- Harriet (Notebook C paragraph Page 12-13)

Importance: Harriet says this quote shortly after Felix's death. She has realized at this point that her entire life from now on is in her own hands. She also realizes all of the time that she has wasted being someone she really wasn't. This quote shows that she is more than a little worried about how to proceed in this new life.

Color, she said, has corporeal meaning. Before we can name the color we're seeing, it's in us.

-- Harriet (Maisie Lord paragraph Page 24)

Importance: This quote by Harriet shows that she believes and feels that art is not just a visual response, but that before it can be experienced, the color is felt.

The wide-open future, the great yawn of absence, made me dizzy, anxious, and, occasionally, high, as if I had doped myself, but I hadn't. I was the ruler of my own little Brooklyn fiefdom, a rich widow woman, long past babies and toddlers and teenagers, and my brain was fat with ideas.

-- Harriet (Maisie Lord paragraph Page 27)

Importance: This is Harriet's declaration to herself that she is now free, free from almost anyone that would make her feel badly about her art. She is free to create as much as she'd like, where she'd like. At this point she hasn't stopped to think about how she will show the art.

I was over the hill and had never had a penis. It was too late for me to go as myself. I had disappeared for good, and the ease with which I had done so had made it clear to me how shallow my relations had been with all of them.

-- Harriet (Harriet Burden Notebook C paragraph Page 31)

Importance: In this quote the reader sees that Harriet has now come to the realization that the deck may be stacked against her, not only because of her gender, but because of her age. This is a key turning point as she realizes that she will need to adopt a male persona.

Rachel," she said, "isn't it strange that we don't know who we are? I mean, we know so little about ourselves it's shocking. We tell ourselves a story and we go along believing in it, and then, it turns out, it's the wrong story, which means we've lived the wrong life.

-- Harriet (Rachel Briefman paragraph Page 50)

Importance: This quote by Harriet indicates that she is realizing that she had been living an unfulfilled life and marks the beginning of her own self discovery.



Awkward brilliance in a boy is more easily categorized, and it conveys no sexual threat.
-- Rachel (Rachel Briefman paragraph Page 51)

Importance: Rachel says this as she remembers what Harry was like as a young girl and young woman. Harry's incredible intellect alienated her from most others her age. Rachel says that if Harry had been a boy that this behavior would have been tolerated, but not so for a girl.

The Greeks knew that the mask in the theater was not a disguise but a means of revelation.

-- Harriet (Notebook A paragraph Page 58)

Importance: Harriet realizes in this quote that she will need a front man, that through them she can reveal what she was always truly capable of.

It is interesting that not all, but many women were celebrated only when their days as desirable sexual objects had passed.

-- Rosemary (Rosemary Lerner paragraph Page 69)

Importance: Rosemary Lerner was one of the few art critics that were kind to Harry from the beginning. The narrator tells the reader that after Harry's death, Lerner wrote a biography about Burden. Rosemary is reiterating what Harry realized, which was that once her beauty faded and her usefulness as a wife or mother, she was allowed to explore her own capabilities.

I wanted to fly, you see, and breathe fire. Those were my dearest wishes, but it was forbidden, or I felt it was forbidden. It has taken me a very long time, a very long time to give myself permission to fly and breathe fire.

-- Harriet (Bruno Kleinfeld paragraph Page 75)

Importance: Harriet makes herself vulnerable to Bruno in a way that she has never allowed herself to be with anyone. This was her vision for herself as a young girl and she is expressing her fear in entering into another relationship where she might not be allowed to be herself again. Of course, Bruno is able to reassure her.

In that way, I am like my mother. But I fell in love with your mother because she is exactly the opposite. She is deep and thorough and cares only about the questions she keeps trying to answer for herself. The world has little use for people like your mother, but her time will come.

-- Felix (Maisie Lord paragraph Page 84)

Importance: This is one of only a few direct quotes attributed to Felix. In it he sees with clear eyes what Harry will later learn, which is that society wasn't quite ready for her and her brilliance. In this quote the reader does see that on some level Felix did care for Harry and hoped that she would one day be able to garner some recognition.



My mother believed and I believe in really looking hard at things because, after a while, what you see isn't at all what you thought you were seeing just a short time before. Looking at any person or object carefully means that it will become increasingly strange, and you will see more and more.

-- Maisie (Maisie Lord paragraph Page 87)

Importance: This quote by Harry is important because it is what she tries to work into most of her art pieces. Her work is not such that a person can just blow past it and understand it. Rather, she makes the viewer have to stop and study and think for a while.

That's how magic works — sleight-of-hand tricks, for example. Harry was ready to tell the world, but nobody was ready for her confession.

-- Phineas (Phineas Q. Eldridge paragraph Page 129)

Importance: Phinny was one of Harry's truest friends and in this quote he is lamenting the fact that it has only been after her death that Harry has been recognized. People and society are just not ready for people who break the mold he suggests.

All intellectual and artistic endeavors, even jokes, ironies, and parodies, fare better in the mind of the crowd when the crowd knows that somewhere behind the great work or the great spoof it can locate a cock and a pair of balls.

-- Harriet (Editor's Note paragraph Page 1)

Importance: This is a particularly relevant quote because it captures not only Harriet's personality (bawdy and brainy), but it also gives the overall theme and tone for the novel, which is gender inequity and bias in the art world.