Call It Sleep Study Guide

Call It Sleep by Henry Roth

BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

Henry Roth's 1934 novel *Call It Sleep* is based loosely on the author's own experiences growing up as a Jewish American in New York City during the early 1900s. In the novel, David Schearl is a young boy who must come to terms with conflicting forces in an effort to forge his own identity. The conflicting forces include intense love for and dependence on his mother Genya coupled with fear and hatred for his unstable father Albert. David must also reconcile his Jewish heritage with both his mainstream American tendencies and his curiosity about other cultures and religions.

The novel is notable for its use of Yiddish both directly and indirectly through character dialogue. Most of the dialogue spoken in the Schearl household is in Yiddish, but it is transcribed for the reader in deliberately formal and elegant phrasing. By contrast, the language David and his friends use in the streets is rough, profane, and so heavily seasoned with dialect that it can be difficult to understand. For example, "W'od id 'ey do t'yuh in de polliss station?" is what one character asks after David returns from a brief episode at a local police station. This turns the table on the reader, clearly illustrating the struggles immigrants face when trying to communicate in a language that is not natively their own. The author does this by transforming Yiddish into easily understood English, and transforming English into a daunting collection of strange sounds.

Call It Sleep was first published in the middle of the Great Depression, and it was consequently overlooked by many mainstream readers at the time. Although Roth still wrote occasional short stories after the novel's poor performance, he relied on alternate careers to support himself for the next thirty years. It was only in the 1960s, when the novel was rediscovered by critics and readers alike, that Roth was finally able to once again return to writing as more than just a hobby.

Call It Sleep offers a view of the American dream through the eyes of an immigrant child. In addition, the book has earned its place as an enduring document of the Jewish American experience. As Alfred Kazin writes in his introduction to the Picador paperback edition of the novel,

Though the book was not properly welcomed or understood until it was reissued in paperback in 1964, it has become a world favorite, with millions of copies in print. We can see now that the book belongs to the side of the 1930s that still believed in the sacredness of literature, whether or not it presumed to change the world.

Author Biography

Henry Roth

Herschel Roth was born on February 8, 1906, in the Austro-Hungarian region of Galitzia (also spelled Galicia), in present-day Ukraine. His family immigrated to the United States while he was still a baby, and as a child he lived for several years on New York's Lower East Side, the setting for *Call It Sleep*.

Roth became interested in writing after being exposed by university friends to authors such as T. S. Eliot and James Joyce, the latter of whose stream-of-consciousness experimentation with language had a profound impact on Roth's own writing. His first novel, *Call It Sleep*, was published in 1934 to excellent reviews but poor sales.

Although Roth still occasionally sold short story to magazines such as the *New Yorker*, he gave up on writing as a primary occupation and became a poultry farmer in Maine. Thirty years after its initial publication, *Call It Sleep* experienced a resurgence in popularity and became a bestseller. Over the next three decades, Roth returned to writing, creating six volumes of a semi-autobiographical series known collectively as *Mercy of a Rude Stream*. Two of the volumes were published prior to the author's death on October 13, 1995, at the age of eighty-nine. Two more volumes were published posthumously. As of 2007, the final two volumes remain unpublished.

Book 1: the Cellar

Chapters 1-9

Four years later, the boy—whose name is David Schearl—is almost six years old. The family lives in an apartment in the Brownsville neighborhood of New York City. David's father works as a printer; David saves the pages of the daily calendar in their home because his father made it. At the bottom of the stairs leading to their apartment is a cellar door that "bulged with darkness." David fears what lurks behind the door.

One day, David is taken across town by his father, Albert. He is directed to enter, by himself, the printing office where Albert worked, and to ask for his father's personal belongings and final pay. Inside, David is told that Albert nearly killed another employee with a hammer. Several people mention to David that his father is crazy. When David emerges with his father's clothes and money, Albert interrogates him about the people inside. David lies and says the people inside said nothing to him.

Albert gets a new printing job and befriends a foreman named Joe Luter, who hails from the same part of Austria as Albert. Luter is invited to join the family for dinner, and David notices that Luter's presence causes his father to be much more pleasant than usual. Still, David cannot bring himself to like Luter. One night, when Luter has arranged for Albert to go to the theatre alone, Luter returns to the Schearl house to retrieve a

package he has forgotten. He makes sly advances toward David's mother—in front of David, who rarely leaves his mother's company—but she politely rebuffs him.

A week later, David's mother takes him to visit their upstairs neighbors, the Minks. Mrs. Mink has a son, Yussie, about the same age as David, and an older daughter named Annie who has a metal brace on one leg. The three children play hide and seek until Yussie is called away to go buy bread. Annie then leads David into a closet to "play bad." He is horrified by what she wants him to do, and he flees to his mother's side in the kitchen. They depart, with David's mother unaware of Annie's actions: "But she didn't know as he knew how the whole world could break into a thousand little pieces, all buzzing, all whining, and no one hearing them and no one seeing them except himself."

David spends the next day avoiding Annie and Yussie. On his way home, he sees a funeral carriage and asks his mother about death and the afterlife. Her answers about what happens to the dead are honest and blunt: "I only know that they are buried in the dark earth and their names last a few more lifetimes on their gravestones."

Chapters 10-16

Luter visits the Schearls for dinner one night but cuts short his visit, and tells them he will not be able to join them for dinner later in the week. After he leaves, Albert reveals that Luter is going to visit a marriage broker, and that Luter has asked Albert to work some overtime at the shop. After dinner, a strange course of events results in David accidentally injuring Yussie, and David subsequently getting beaten by his father with a clothes hanger. David's mother puts an end to the beating, and tells Albert that he will never again strike their son.

Soon after, while David is outside playing with some other boys, he sees Luter enter his family's building while only his mother is home. Immediately after, Yussie confronts David over his injury and challenges him to a fight. The boys all gang up on David, and he strikes one boy to the ground as he flees into his building. Fearful that the boy has been injured, and unable to go to his mother because of Luter, David faces his fear and hides in the cellar: "It was horrible, the dark. The rats lived there, the hordes of nightmare, the wobbly faces, the crawling and misshapen things." After several minutes, David can no longer remain in the cellar and rushes out into the street; he runs away quickly, hoping no one follows.

When he finally grows tired, he begins retracing his route back home. He soon discovers that he is lost, and no one can understand the name of his street, which he pronounces "Boddeh." A woman takes him to the nearest police station, where they eventually figure out the correct street: Barhdee. His mother picks him up soon after and takes him home. Although he never mentions it to her, David cannot escape the thought that his mother "played bad" with Luter when he came to visit.

The next time Luter is expected for dinner, he cancels. David's father detects a sudden change in Luter, as if the man is trying to end their friendship. Soon after, Albert comes home from work with a bandage on his right hand. He has injured it in the printing press,

and he blames Luter's coldness for distracting him from his work. He vows never to return to his job and never to work on a printing press again. Yussie stops by, and David makes peace with him and the other boy David had knocked down while fleeing on the day he got lost.

Book 2: the Picture

Chapters 1-9

Two months later, David's father finds a new job as a milkman, and the family moves to a new neighborhood. They live on the fourth floor of their apartment building; instead of a stairway to the cellar, David is now confronted by a stairway to the roof: "They were inviolable those stairs, guarding the light and silence."

In May, just three months after the family moves in, David's Aunt Bertha—one of his mother's younger sisters—comes to live in America. David's father reluctantly agrees to let her live in the apartment for a while. Bertha is a plump, red-haired woman who always looks messy, sweats profusely, and speaks with a sharp tongue. This last trait results in countless arguments with David's father.

When Aunt Bertha develops severe toothaches, she visits the dentist and discovers she must have six teeth extracted. She begins making frequent visits to the dentist—at first reluctantly, but soon with a strange anticipation. Soon enough she tells her sister that she has met a potential suitor at the dentist's office, a man named Nathan Sternowitz. Nathan is a Russian American widower with two daughters, aged ten and eleven. When Bertha makes plans to bring him to dinner, David's mother buys a picture of corn stalks and cornflowers to decorate their apartment. She tells David that it reminds her of where she grew up.

One Sunday, while David's father is out, his mother finally reveals to Aunt Bertha a secret she has been keeping since before she came to America. The two women talk in a mixture of Polish and Yiddish; David tries to listen, but can only make out small pieces of their dialogue. He hears enough to understand that his mother had a relationship with a non-Jewish organist at a local church where they lived, and her parents feared a scandal would emerge. Six months later his mother met Albert, and did not speak of the organist again.

Book 3: the Coal

Chapters 1-9

In February, David's father decides that it is time for David to attend a cheder, or religious class taught by a rabbi. The rabbi, Reb Yidel Pankower, is a stern instructor who strikes his students whenever they make mistakes. David performs well, however, and is especially intrigued when the rabbi tells his students of Isaiah's purification with a fiery coal, brought down to him by an angel.

One day, David is accosted by several white boys who insist on showing him some "magic." They take him to Tenth Street, where there are electrified trolley car tracks, and tell him to throw a piece of metal across the tracks. He does as they command, and the metal ignites in a flash of light. Terrified and awed, David runs to his cheder. He tells the rabbi that he has seen a coal, like Isaiah, in the crack of the trolley car tracks. The rabbi laughs and calls David a fool: "God's light is not between car-tracks." To David, however, the light signifies a great power that the rabbi does not understand.

Book 4: the Rail

Chapters 1-6

Months later, David is told that he must go with his father on a milk delivery route. It is not his father's normal route, and his father does not want to leave the wagon unattended for fear of thieves in the neighborhood. David's job is simply to stay with the wagon while his father makes deliveries within the buildings. While David is sitting with the cart, two men in tatters approach him and attempt to get him away from the cart. When David refuses to move, the men simply take two bottles of milk and tell David that they will pay his father. David knows better, but he is powerless to stop the two. When his father returns, David tells him about the two thieves. His father chases them down with his wagon and beats them with his fists and his horse-whip. He warns David not to tell his mother what has happened.

After the incident, David attends cheder. On his way home, he sees some neighborhood boys trying to capture an escaped canary perched on the house next to his. He later hears the same boys talking about how they had seen a naked woman in one of the apartments while looking for the canary, and he quickly realizes that they are talking about his mother. He flees to the sanctuary of his building's roof and is calmed by the peace he finds there.

Chapters 7-14

The next morning, David returns to the roof. He is surprised when another boy appears on the neighboring roof with a kite. The boy, a Polish American named Leo, seems to befriend David at first even though Leo is older. However, Leo later suggests that he does not want to spend time with David unless David can go skating with him.

Thinking his Aunt Bertha might have skates in the candy shop she has opened with her new husband Nathan, David goes to visit her the next day. He is disappointed when she has nothing for him except candy. While David is there, Bertha asks him to wake up her two stepdaughters, Polly and Esther. He does, and Esther, afraid of the dark, convinces him to go downstairs to the cellar bathroom with her so she can use it. While in the bathroom, Esther tells David he can watch her if he wants, but he does not want to.

Returning home, David discovers that Leo has been looking for him. He visits Leo's apartment, and he is intrigued by the Christian artifacts he sees there. He asks Leo if he

can have one, but Leo refuses. After hearing about David's cousin Esther at the candy store, however—and how she wanted David to follow her down into the cellar—Leo offers David a broken rosary if he will take Leo to meet her. David reluctantly agrees to take Leo to the candy store the following morning.

The next morning, David changes his mind and tries to avoid Leo, but Leo catches him. The boys travel to the candy store and sneak into his aunt's yard, where they find Esther. Leo convinces Esther to come into the street and take skating lessons from him, and then he leads her into the basement where he forces himself on her in the dark. David, who has been given the rosary for the part he played, does not know what to do, and he simply hides. Esther's sister Polly hears the commotion and investigates; she is shocked to see a strange boy in the basement with Esther, and threatens to tell their parents. As Esther tries to explain what really happened, David is revealed and runs away to his cheder.

Chapters 15-19

At cheder, David reads for his rabbi and a visiting rabbi. Both are impressed with his abilities, but he breaks down in the middle of his recitation. When the rabbi asks what is wrong, David invents a fantastic story: He has just learned from his Aunt Bertha that his mother is not really his mother. He has also learned that his real father is a non-Jewish organist who lives somewhere in Europe. David is excused from the cheder and runs away. His rabbi decides to visit David's mother and repeat David's story.

Back at the candy store, Bertha and her husband Nathan find out about Leo's assault on Esther. Nathan first blames Bertha, and then decides to go to David's home and tell his mother of the part David played in the affair. Bertha pursues him all the way, trying to stop him.

David finally gets home and discovers that the rabbi is there. The rabbi has told David's parents of his strange tale and learned that David was lying. When the rabbi leaves, however, David's father Albert finally feels that his own longtime suspicions are justified. Albert believes that he is not really David's father, and that much of what David said is actually true. Suddenly Bertha and Nathan arrive at the apartment, with Nathan intending to confront David's parents about their boy's wicked behavior. Bertha attempts to silence her husband, but David blurts out a confession. David's father—no longer believing he is the boy's father—seizes him and begins whipping him with his horse whip. As he does, the broken rosary given to David by Leo falls out of the boy's pocket. David's father sees this as a final confirmation that David is the bastard son of a non-Jew. David's father threatens to kill the boy, to "rid the world of a sin," but David flees the apartment, into the streets.

Chapters 20-21

David takes a zinc-coated ladle from a milk can and travels to Tenth Street, where he had once seen the electrified trolley tracks give off light like Isaiah's coal. He puts the

ladle into the tracks, and he is still touching it when the electrical burst hits: "*The hawk of radiance raking him with / talons of fire, battering his skull with / a beak of fire, praying his body with / pinions of intolerable light*." The resulting electrical burst knocks him out cold. Many of the passersby believe the boy is dead, but a doctor revives him with smelling salts. His ankle is hurt, but otherwise he seems fine. The doctor and a policeman take the boy home on an ambulance wagon. Bertha and Nathan are gone, and the argument between David's parents has cooled. David's father asks his mother if she blames him for David's injury. She tells him, "None foresaw this. No one alone brought it on. And if it's faults we must talk about it's mine as well." The family once again achieves a tentative peace as David closes his eyes: "One might as well call it sleep."

Plot Summary

David Schearl and his mother, Genya, arrive at Ellis Island in 1907, joining his father who has been working and saving for their passage. He begins his life in America as a resident of a New York City slum, living on the second floor of a three-story flat. As David progresses through childhood, he is assaulted by a host of traumatic experiences, all of which serve to impact his internal sensitivity and innocence. His father, Albert, is at first unable to maintain steady employment and is an angry, violent man who verbally abuses both David and Genya. Even though he eventually lands a permanent position as a milkman, Albert is unable to curb his basic nature and, in some instances, physically abuses David. Genya is a sensitive, quiet woman who attempts to protect David from his father and the realities of slum life, but is often unable to do so. David's additional doses of reality include life in poverty, playmates who are disagreeable, bullying, and, at times, focused on sexual encounters, and Hebrew training from a dictatorial rabbi. David appears to be unable to foster lasting friendships with any peers, primarily because his introverted and sensitive nature is incompatible, but also because he prefers to explore his world alone. He fears the dark, his father, and the roughness of other children, looking to his mother for comfort and protection. A classic oedipal relationship within the family unit provides a solid backdrop for the interactions among David, Genya and Albert.

Through a series of events, the reader is lead through David's childhood and thereby gains an understanding of urban culture in the early twentieth century, the plight of Eastern European immigrants in America, and the forced early maturity of children of the era. Life in these times is depicted as a continual struggle for basic necessities, as well as the conflict between retaining one's cultural and ethnic identity and assimilation into the foreign culture of America. Throughout this period, David struggles to make sense of life, often retreating to reveries which he states "might as well be sleep." During these, he re-lives events and incidents which have impacted his being, attempting to mold them into some sense of order and purpose. In the climactic finish, during which David is caught in the turmoil of deceit and bad choices, and, ultimately, a serious accident, he has not so much made sense of his experiences as he has come to understand that every individual, including his father, is a compilation of all his/her experiences, and that accepting these as they are is tantamount to growing up. Indeed, David is able to pity his father, even as he triumphs over him.

Prologue

Prologue Summary

It is 1907, remarkable only because it purports to be the year of the largest number of immigrants to pass through Ellis Island. David Schearl and his mother are arriving to reunite with his father, Albert, who has been in New York for some time. In fact, David was born in Europe, and his father has never seen him. The reunion, however, is marred by several incidents, not the least of which is Albert's foul mood and his anger that his wife does not even recognize him. For her part, Genya is nervous but submissive. David, just a toddler, is frightened by this man he now will call "father."

Prologue Analysis

Reunions, especially of families, are generally joyous events. This one, however, is clearly meant as a foreshadowing of things to come. One is struck by the coldness with which Albert greets his wife and his immediate criticism of their child, whom he has never seen. Perhaps, however, it is a "sign of the times." European immigrants, particularly Jews from Eastern Europe, were not particularly welcomed into American society, and most were condemned to menial jobs and life in urban slums. The generational culture must also be considered. Adults in the early twentieth century viewed life as a serious endeavor, consumed by hard work, raising children with sternness, and, in the case of men, the need to be rigid, tough, and unemotional.

Book I: The Cellar

Book I: The Cellar Summary

Book I, comprised of sixteen short chapters, details the experiences that begin to shape the personality of a young child living in the slums of New York City. David is now almost six and appears to be settled into a typical life in an urban slum. He lives with his parents on the second floor of a three-story flat, the first floor being reserved for the cellar, of which David is horribly afraid. His daily routine involves tearing yesterday's page from the calendar and saving it in a shoe box, playing outside until the noon whistle blows, signaling lunch, and returning outside again until the the whistle blows to signal quitting time. David has a "sometime" playmate, Yussie, who has moved into the flat above his, although they do not appear to have much in common. He seems to prefer solitude and the activity of watching other children play, tussle, and race through the neighborhood with makeshift toys and foul language. At times, the chantings and rhyme singing of girls as they play promote vague memories of rivers, roads, and trees, something his new environment entirely lacks.

David's father takes him on an excursion, an event which is both rare and frightening. Eventually, they stop across the street from Albert's place of work, and David is sent in to retrieve his father's locker contents and final paycheck. Inside, David learns that other employees consider Albert crazy and that there had been a violent outburst of temper during which Albert raised a hammer to others. For this act, he was fired. Albert must now look for new work, in the printing business, as is his skill. Dolman's Press employs him, and his foreman is from the same region in Austria. He is a pleasant, friendly fellow, this Joe Luter, and he has been invited to dinner. David's mother has prepared carefully for the guest and is the recipient of effusive praise from Luter. For the first time, David eats a dinner which includes conversation, and it unnerves him. As Luter leaves, father informs his wife that finally he has found his permanent job.

Luter becomes a regular dinner guest, paying the Schearls for his dinner meal. While this makes the evening meal certainly more pleasant for David, he begins to feel uneasy about Luter and his continual presence in their home. Luter, having discovered that Genya has not ventured beyond the neighborhood, offers theatre tickets and even babysits for David when they go. Albert is thrilled to have such a friend as Luter and shrugs off his wife's counsel that perhaps they are becoming too close, a situation which could become problematic at work. When Luter arrives at the Schearl house on an evening that Albert has gone to the theatre alone, Genya realizes that he has designs on her, and she must thwart his verbal advances until he finally departs. David becomes thus more uncomfortable with Luter.

David's father and Luter have gone to the theatre, and his mother is taking him upstairs to visit Yussie's mother, Mrs. Mink. Yussie shows David a rat trap, explaining that the rats live in the cellar and come into the apartments at night, solidifying David's fear of the cellar. The two boys, along with Yussie's sister, Annie, play hide and seek, until

Yussie is sent to the store for bread. During Yussie's absence, Annie takes David into the bedroom closet and attempts mutual sexual molestation, an activity promptly rejected by David, who finds refuge in the kitchen with his mother. David is not thrilled to get up and go to school the next day, primarily because he might run into Annie. It had snowed and, rather than take the dirty path of all of the the other children, he runs through white drifts which remained pure, while other boys engage in a contest of urinating in the snow. At dismissal, David again avoids Yussie and Annie but comes upon a caravan of funeral carriages. The dead man is being brought out of the home and loaded into the first carriage. Frightened, he runs all the way home, forces himself to pass the cellar door without his mother's assistance from above, and relates to his mother what he has seen. In response to his questions about death, mother describes the death of her grandmother many years before. David has difficulty understanding terms such as "eternal years" of sleep. Most frightening, however, is the fact that dead people are buried in the earth forever, never to wake up.

David is not pleased that Mr. Luter is coming for Friday Sabbath dinner, so much so that he dreams of hiding and running away. At the table, his anxiety causes him to spill soup and incur the wrath of his father. He discovers, however, that Luter will be leaving immediately after supper and will not be at dinner the next evening either. A reprieve! Later, David and his mother learn that Luter is going to a marriage broker, in hopes of obtaining a bride who has enough money to fund his own printing shop. David is happy that Luter will not be so frequent a visitor. Once Luter has gone off to the marriage broker, Albert sends David to the corner candy store to purchase a newspaper. Freezing rain is falling, and David falls, soaking the paper and losing the pennies of change. Reactions of his mother and father are clearly the opposite. Genya is concerned about David, and Albert can only rant at his clumsiness and failure. Mother departs for Yussie's apartment to see Mrs. Mink's new dress, and Yussie remains with a reluctant David, insisting that they play with a wooden hangar he has. When Yussie hits David with the hangar, David kicks him, causing a nosebleed. Albert is so angry, he begins to beat David with the hangar, only to be stopped by mother's return. The scene is frightening, with Genya insisting that father is never to touch David again.

David is playing "follow the leader" with a group of boys, happy that Yussie is not with them. Even this small pleasure is sabotaged, however, as he observes Luter going to his house. Instinctively, David understands that Luter is there to take advantage of his mother while his father is at work. To make matters worse, Yussie arrives to taunt him about the previous night's beating by his father. Encircled by the entire group of boys, David lashes out at one of them, who falls onto the pavement and appears to be unconscious. Afraid of the consequences, and knowing that he does not want to go home to his mother and Luter, David runs first into the dreaded cellar and then out and through unknown streets, to the outskirts of the residential areas, where he becomes mesmerized by telephone poles and vacant fields. Alone and lost, he is unable to find his way home in the oncoming darkness, finally to be taken to a police station where his mother retrieves him. Reassured by his mother that the injured boy is fine and that Luter is gone, David feels his world "righted" again. The more subdued reaction of his father to this latest escapade, moreover, affords him some small comfort.

Luter does not return for dinner again, and David hopes his absence is permanent. Throughout the week, moreover, Albert complains that he is being treated badly at work by the man he thought to be his friend. Luter is avoiding him and eating lunch with others. David's mother seems disturbed by this and tries to calm Albert with possible reasons for the change in Luter's behavior. Alone with David, however, mother appears despondent and anxiety-ridden at one moment and almost manic the next. He is certain that her moods are related in some way to Luter, as are his father's, who continues to come home angry each day. So angry is Albert, in fact, that he is ready to lash out at Luter, but, before the chance presents itself, he badly injures his thumb in the printing press and is sent home, perhaps for weeks. He vows never to return and to find an outside job at which he may be his own boss. David is a bit forlorn that his father will be home both day and night.

Book I: The Cellar Analysis

In this first book, the reader is given a clear picture of the three major characters - Albert, Genya and David. Here are significant contrasts. Genya is a submissive, sensitive woman who, while intent upon pleasing her husband, focuses her major effort on the well-being of her child. Albert is the antithesis, an angry, abusive man who is unable to form lasting relationships with either family members of peers at work. Further, we realize that his temper is the major factor in his inability to maintain consistent employment.

David's childhood is probably typical of immigrant children in New York City slums. With little to do, and no money for pleasures, he is reduced to small bits of conversation and play with other children and a great deal of time for thought. The one bright spot of his existence, indeed, his consuming focus, is the relationship with his mother whom he sees as his protector and confidant. His fears of the cellar, for example, are allayed by his mother's standing in the doorway as he passes in and out of the home. Safety lies within his mother's physical presence and nurturing.

As this book progresses, the reader is able to glean, as David does, another side to his father, specifically in his relationship with Luter. During the evening dinners, Albert is able to engage in calm, pleasant conversation, reminiscing about their mutual former homeland, Austria. A bit of additional insight is gained when Albert states that, in Austria, a man would walk out of his home onto the earth and was the same man. In America, however, a man walks out onto pavement, and it changes him. Perhaps there is some room here for pity, however, it is short-lived. David has also observed an adult male who treats his mother well, although the feelings of unease are clear. Instinctively, he suspects Luter's motives, but, as well, there appears to be some oedipal responses occurring within this child.

Several events serve to traumatize David during this first book. Obviously, his father's behavior is frightening. The attempted molestation by Annie and the arrival of Luter to his home during the daytime, moreover, introduce David to a world in which sex can be tainted and dirty. His father's beating demonstrates an abnormal response to a rather

normal childhood disagreement, and his mother's clear stand that she will not tolerate the physical abuse of her son draws a battle line between the couple. Further, David is introduced to the concept of death, realizing for the first time that death is forever and that bodies are actually buried in the earth. David feels utterly assaulted by these realities, concludes that, indeed, the world is a dangerous, hostile place, and continues to cling to his mother for some sense of security.

Book II: The Picture

Book II: The Picture Summary

The nine short chapters comprising Book II begin with a major change in David's life. Father has landed a job as a milkman, navigating a horse-driven wagon through the streets of a neighborhood quite far from their flat. In order to be closer to his route, the family moves to a new section of the city, specifically the Lower East Side, a noisy, crowded and cluttered area. They now live on the top floor of an apartment house with a skylight window, which David finds relaxing, compensating for the other inconveniences of his young life. Father now goes to work at night and sleeps during the day, so David must remain quiet or outside when he comes home from school. Another change has been the arrival from Austria of Genya's younger sister, Bertha. She moves in over Albert's objection, who finds her crude and uncivilized. Bertha is fat, homely, and loud, a complete contrast to mother, and Albert's continued disapproval is obvious. Eventually, Albert and Bertha have a "blow-out," and, from that point forward, ignore one another as much as possible. Bertha does take David on frequent excursions, however, and while he does not particularly like going out with her, he nevertheless is being exposed to museums and landmarks.

Bertha's goal is to marry. She takes a job in a flower-making factory and begins to purchase new clothing and small luxuries, all of which do not change her basic disheveled, slovenly appearance. Her teeth are in terrible condition, and she finally is persuaded to visit a dentist, who pulls seven of them and begins to fit her for bridges. While at first she was reluctant to visit the dentist, now she is happy to go and spends quite a long time at his office. As well, she begins to focus on grooming, bathing twice a week, purchasing face powder and dousing herself with perfume daily. Eventually, it is revealed that she has met a man. Her new suitor is a Russian widower by the name of Nathan Sternowitz, whom she has met at the dentist's office. He has proposed marriage, but Bertha has misgivings, specifically related to the fact that he has two young adolescent girls who she will have to help raise. Nathan is an enterprising individual, however, and they have discussed opening up a candy shop which Bertha will manage while he continues in his regular employment. She is attracted by the potential of having more money than most and relishes the idea of being her own boss.

Through conversations between mother and Bertha, David learns that his mother was a dreamy-eyed young girl who read a great deal. As well, she spurned the potential husbands which were brought to her by her parents. Bertha alludes to some "secret" of mother's, and David is highly curious, as Bertha continues to press mother about her reasons for marrying Albert after what she knew about him. Again, David comes to understand that there are important things he does not know about his mother and father, but the conversation quickly turns to Nathan. Bertha admits that, while fond of one another, they are not in love, but that her options are limited by her appearance and the competition of other Jewish girls who are attractive and far more cultured. She

believes that Nathan will be her only suitor, and she does appreciate his jolly personality.

Nathan is invited to dinner, and mother has purchased a picture to put on the kitchen wall. It is a landscape of corn and tiny blue flowers that grow in Austria during the summer months. This picture, for unknown reason, has seemed to make her more animated and joyful, and David wonders why. When Bertha arrives with Nathan, Albert maintains his usual scowling demeanor, hardly recognizing Nathan's presence. Throughout dinner, mother, Bertha, and Nathan discuss his job and his goals for a candy store, while Albert remains sullen and silent. Bertha dominates the conversation with talk of how much money they will be able to acquire, with income from both Nathan's job and the candy store, so much, in fact, that they will eventually be able to afford a home with steam heat, indoor toilets and a white bathtub. In her discourse, she manages to belittle the Schearl's apartment and bathing facilities. Albert becomes angry and spats out that he will be happy to see her go soon and that, even if he does not attend her wedding, he will certainly be dancing about it. Dinner becomes a tense scene, and Nathan finally suggests that he and Bertha go for a walk. Once they leave, Genya must spend time placating Albert and diffusing his foul mood.

The tension between Albert and Bertha is affecting the relationship between the sisters as well, and David witnesses a strange discourse, some of it in Polish which he cannot understand. There is the mention of twins which had died, presumably their brothers, and their hostile, tyrannical father. Eventually, Bertha persuades Genya to reveal the "secret" that she knows Genya to be holding. David is on the kitchen floor and listens intently, but, because much of the conversation remains in Polish, can only grasp bits and pieces. Moving into the front room to get his coat to go outside, David decides instead to remain unseen behind the wall, as the women switch to Yiddish and English, which he can understand. David learns that his mother had an affair with a "goy' (Jewish term for Christian), a church organist. Her parents had discovered this situation, and her father in particular had responded with brutal verbal and physical abuse. Realizing that his daughter was ruined, he determined to marry her off to the first Jew who would have her, afraid as well that she might be pregnant. Genya would have run off with her lover, however he dismissed her in order to marry into a family of wealth. She was quickly married off to Albert, convinced that this would be her only chance to get away from her father.

Book II: The Picture Analysis

David seems to feel comfortable in his new neighborhood and ventures out more, although, continuing to prefer solitude, he does not spend a great deal of time with the other children. While Aunt Bertha's presence has added tension to his environment and competition for his mother's attention, it appears that David has found relief from his father's criticism and anger. It is now placed upon Bertha, whom Albert clearly despises, apparently because she is assertive and speaks her mind with candor. This, Albert feels, is intolerable in a woman.

The reader also gains valuable insight into Genya's childhood, spent with a domineering, often angry and abusive father and subservient mother. It appears that she has married a man very much like her father and, as well, has modeled her mother's submissiveness. Genya was not always such a person, however. In her childhood, she was a romantic who, like her grandmother, believed in love and spent a great deal of time reading romance novels and engaging in dreamy reveries. David wonders what "secret" she holds and, upon its revelation during overheard conversation, probably does not fully comprehend what had happened. There is also the hint, that David may be the child of his mother's affair, but the reader is left to ponder this possibility without definite resolution.

The contrast between the personalities of Bertha and Genya is striking. Because both were raised in the same household, it is difficult at first to understand how they could be so different. Once the reader learns of Genya's secret, however, it becomes clear that she gave up on the idea of love and was shamed into a forced marriage with a man who appears to have a questionable background himself. Obviously, her only joy now lies within her relationship with her child. Genya's other outlet appears to be the possession of the picture, reminding her of a time in Austria when green fields and blue flowers abounded and she was within the throes of romance. Bertha, more assertive in nature, and not riddled with any shame, has taken matters more into her own hands and has fled her abusive father. She clearly intends to remain in control, moreover, as the relationship between Nathan and her is more revealed. She will marry him but will remain the dominant one in the union, and Nathan appears to be compliant. Bertha's nature is bound to conflict with Albert's concept of a "woman's place," and the reader is not surprised when this conflict becomes severe.

Book III: The Coal

Book III: The Coal Summary

David, upon Albert's request, is attending cheder each afternoon, after school. Here, under the tutelage of a crusty, frequently abusive rabbi, he is learning Hebrew, first by reading the Old Testament in Hebrew, and then translating it. This study is meant to prepare him for eventual Bar Mitzvah, a "coming into manhood" for boys of the Jewish faith. Rabbi Yidel is clearly dismayed about this young generation of Jewish boys, seeing them as undisciplined, rowdy urchins who have very little interest in Judaism and even less in becoming model members of the Jewish community. In the course of study, David is particularly interested in a passage of the Old Testament wherein God sends an angel to cleanse Isaiah's mouth with coal. Trying to imagine how painful this would be, David concludes that perhaps angel coal would be white and not hot. He returns to this thought throughout the nine chapters of this book.

When David alone is able to read an entire passage with good pronunciation, he receives a penny from the Rabbi and vows to take it home to show his parents, rather than spend it. He hopes his father will be pleased. On the way home, he helps an old woman light her gas lamps and receives another penny. Upon his arrival at home, he finds his mother sitting in the dark, his father still asleep. David questions his mother about God - what is He like, where is He? His mother answers only that God is brighter than the brightest day and is everywhere.

It is Passover, and one of the traditions is to burn a wooden spoon, a chumitz. David is charged with this task and leaves the house to do so. Other Jewish children are burning these spoons in the gutters of the street, and it is David's intention to add his chumitz to one of the fires. Unfortunately, a street cleaner is dousing all of the small fires set for this purpose, and David must find some other way to accomplish this task. Not to do so is a major sin in his faith. He walks to the East River, finds enough debris, starts a fire, and burns his spoon. As he proceeds to the dock, he is mesmerized by the water and quiet and passes into a semi-conscious state, remembering afterward that he had seen something "in another world, a world that once left could not be recalled. All that he knew about it was that it had been complete and dazzling." (p. 334)

Leaving the river, David comes upon a group of tough boys whom he finds threatening and frightening. Hoping to appease them, he follows along as they plan to drop a metal wire on a specific spot on the trolley rail, causing a bright flash of electricity. David is told to throw the wire, and, as he does, the flash occurs, frightening him even more. He runs to the cheder school and, finding it locked because it is far to early, climbs through a window and finds the blue book in which he has read the story of Isaiah and the coal. The remainder of the day finds David experiencing a wide range of emotions within himself, but he now feels a warmth, sees light everywhere, and is no longer holds childish fears.

Book III: The Coal Analysis

Though only eight, David has begun a spiritual journey, both religious and emotional. His Hebrew lessons have resulted in a desire to know God, and it certainly appears that he has some "awakenings." The overwhelming focus on light in this book, beginning with his concept of white coal, the semi-conscious perception of a dazzling world, his causing of an electric flash by throwing a wire down onto trolley rails, and, ultimately, overcoming his fear of darkness by realizing that he can conjure light in his mind, is clearly symbolic. Further, his mother has described God as brighter than the brightest day. Spiritual growth and understanding will allow him to discard the irrational fears of childhood and now "...as he walked homeward his spirit uncurled, expanded." (p. 350), perhaps as that of the Jews during the first Passover, when they were delivered from Egypt and thus darkness. David's deliverance from his fear, even though potentially temporary, serves to produce a serenity, security and growing independence.

Book IV: The Rail, Chapters 1-4

Book IV: The Rail, Chapters 1-4 Summary

Albert must take a part of an injured milkman's route, in a bad section of the city, and insists that David accompany him, in order to protect the wagon and its contents while he delivers the mild. As David waits, his father out of sight, two men approach the wagon, terrorizing David, and stealing two bottles of milk. Anticipating his father's reaction, David considers running away but is completely unfamiliar with his surroundings. Furious with both David and the two thieves, Albert whips the horse and races after the men, cornering one and both whipping and punching him unconscious. Back in the wagon, he hits David with the reins and drops him off on their street, with instructions to go directly to cheder and not to relate any of what has happened to his mother.

At cheder, David is too upset by the earlier events to perform adequately. Angry, the rabbi send him home to his mother, his only refuge, as he prays his father has not yet returned home. All of David's old fears of dark hallways and cellars have returned, he realizes, and, almost in a panic, frantically rushes up the stairs and into the house. He bangs on the door in a panic, having to wait for his mother to get out of the tub, dry herself quickly, and unlock the door. As usual, his mother's welcome, love and softness soothe him, and his fears dissipate as he goes outside again, in order to avoid the return of his father.

Book IV: The Rail, Chapters 1-4 Analysis

David is traumatized by the entire experience with his father, and the sense of well-being he has enjoyed all summer is destroyed by this one incident. He hates his father, not merely because he is ill-tempered and cruel, but because he has destroyed David's peace and inner light. That his father can have this kind of power dismays David, who realizes that, as long as he is under the thumb of this tyrant, he will not find comfort and security. Even his mother's nurturing can only be temporary.

Book IV: The Rail, Chapter 5-6

Book IV: The Rail, Chapter 5-6 Summary

Outside once again, and hoping to avoid returning home until his father has gone to bed, David meets up with a group of boys who are still discussing their earlier experience of that day. A woman in one of the flats had inadvertently allowed her canary to fly out of the window. The boys, hoping for a reward for retrieving the bird, and desirous of the adventure it promised, began to chase the bird as it landed on various buildings on the street. Finally, they climb up to a roof and, although the canary is not to be found, they discover another reward. Across the way, from the roof, they are able to see into another flat, and a woman is taking a bath in a tub. They continue to watch as the woman rises from the tub to dry herself, and they continue to discuss the anatomy of the woman. In horror, David realizes that the woman they have seen is, in fact, his mother. He exits quickly, runs back to his own building, and climbs all the way up to the roof. There, in the sunlight and quiet, he composes himself once again, realizing that here there is quiet, solitude and peace.

Book IV: The Rail, Chapter 5-6 Analysis

At such a young age, David is exposed to the threats, anger, danger and vulgarity of a society into which he does not fit. His sensitive nature and his basic innocence create a chasm between himself and his peers and certainly between this boy and his father. The assault of the reality of his environment confirms his need to retreat from it and to find some semblance of identity that is unique and spiritual. Even his mother's gentleness does not now suffice, and he must independently find another refuge. Perhaps the roof is a part of the answer.

Book IV: Chapters 7 - 14

Book IV: Chapters 7 - 14 Summary

Having found the roof a peaceful place, David returns the next morning, only to observe another boy on an adjacent roof, flying a kite. David joins him on his roof, and they strike up an acquaintance. Leo Dugovka has recently moved there, as his mother works as a custodian in a nearby bank. His father, a former railroad worker has died, being crushed between two train cars. Leo stays home by himself and is in charge of his own care and meals. David is quite envious of his new friend's apparent freedom. As well, Leo often returns to his old neighborhood to play, going on roller skates, and he tells David that he will take him along if David, too, can acquire skates. David vows to do so.

Leo is Catholic, and, from him, David learns a bit about Jesus and the crucifixion. David is more interested, however, in acquiring a pair of skates. Knowing that there is no hope from his parents, he walks the distance to Aunt Bertha's candy store, hoping that she has skates, along with other trinkets she sells. Aunt Bertha is happy to see David, and, after a brief conversation, sends him in to the residence to wake up her two lazy teenage step-daughters. The girls engage in a fight, in which their nightgowns fly up, revealing their nudity. David is frightened by them, and, after being forced to go downstairs to the toilet with the older sister and finding that there are no skates in either the store or the home, leaves quickly for home in the rain.

Upon arrival at home, David is told by the other kids that Leo is looking for him. Thrilled to be sought out by his new friend, David races to Leo's house and finds him inside preparing his own lunch. There, on the walls are a picture of Jesus with an exposed red heart, and a crucifix upon which a Jesus figurine is nailed. Leo relates more information about Jesus, including the fact that the Jews had killed Him. David, in turn, relates his experience at Aunt Bertha's. Leo, who is almost thirteen, is bent upon returning to Bertha's with David, in order to fondle the two girls, and bribes David with a broken rosary, stating that it is magic and ultimately winning David's agreement to go the next morning.

Though he tries to avoid meeting up with Leo the next day, David truly wants the rosary and eventually goes outside. He is accosted by Leo and persuaded to skate to Aunt Bertha's. Each boy, with one skate, grabs the back of a wagon and is pulled for a quick trip to the candy store. They avoid Bertha, going around to the back of the house, looking for the girls. David wants no part of Leo's plan, but the promise of the rosary, which Leo has in his pocket, is enough to keep him there. Eventually, Esther finds them, and Leo convinces her to try the skates, helping her while "copping a feel." Finally, Leo and Esther go into a storage cellar, with David as the lookout; however, in his glee to finally have his hands on the rosary, David walks into the sunlight to see it better. Polly arrives home, discovers what is occurring and threatens to tell Bertha and her father. Leo flees, followed a short time later by David.

Book IV: Chapters 7 - 14 Analysis

David's desire to "belong" somewhere drives his behavior in this section. He cannot find acceptance other than with his mother, until, of course, Leo comes along. Leo offers an opportunity for friendship, as well as the chance to acquire rosary beads, which David begins to view as somehow important to his "salvation." The tragic conclusion of this relationship, however, is that David makes a poor choice in leading Leo to Esther, and it becomes apparent that Leo has used David's desire to belong for his own selfish purposes. Another difficult lesson for David. The appalling view that David has of sex has become complete, always with David as a "victim." He has been molested by the disabled Annie, a peer, has witnessed the lecherous Luter's designs on his mother and the glee with which the neighborhood boys describe their viewing of Genya naked, and now has participated in accommodating Leo's sexual designs on his step-cousin, Esther. The prospect that this latest deed will be revealed to Bertha and subsequently his parents is terrifying. Symbolically, this need to "belong" can perhaps be expanded to the larger immigrant population of the time, those non-Western arrivals, many of them Jewish, who sought improved lives but who, instead, found an urban world of pavement, slum housing, noise, and alienation.

Book IV: The Rail, Chapters 15-20

Book IV: The Rail, Chapters 15-20 Summary

David runs all the way to cheder, where, in the company of the other, familiar boys, he is able to forget the horrors of the earlier hours. At cheder, he is called to read before the rabbi's supervisor and does an excellent job, reaping praise. Still reeling from his earlier experience, riddled with guilt, and fearful that his parents will be told, David begins to cry. When the rabbis insist that he tell them what is wrong, he makes up a tale that his mother is really dead, his father is an organist in Europe, and that the woman he calls mother is truly an aunt. He further explains that another aunt, Bertha, has told him this.

When cheder ends, David is afraid to go home, for it is almost certain that his parents know of the afternoon with Leo and Esther. He roams the streets, convincing himself that he can blame it all upon the other two. Eventually, he arrives home, only to find Rabbi Yidel telling his parents of his lie at cheder. David's father responds by accusing Genya of the affair with the goy and marrying him quickly to hide her pregnancy. No denial will he hear, despite Genya's protests. During this discourse, Albert's abusive childhood is revealed as well. His father was a horrible tyrant, hated by Albert, so much so in fact, that when his father was gored by a bull, Albert lifted not a finger to aid, allowing his father to die in the pen. For this reason, it was difficult for Albert to find a bride, until Genya's parents, shamed by her affair with the goy, proposed their union, willing to marry her to any Jew available.

As the current crisis ensues, Nathan and Bertha arrive, Nathan adamant about revealing David's complicity in the molestation of his daughter by Leo, over Bertha's objections. Upon hearing himself completely exposed, David goes into the kitchen, retrieves his father's broken whip, brings it to his father, and prepares for a beating. As Albert beats David vehemently, the rosary falls from his pocket, adding fuel to Albert's anger and his conviction that the lad he has called his son has, in truth a Christian heritage. Genya urges the child to run outside until father's anger has subsided, and David does so. Wandering aimlessly and looking for some place to hide, David finally sits down behind some large milk cans in a store front. Eventually, he finds a metal dipper, picks it up, and heads toward the East River, hoping to repeat the flash of light that had occurred by throwing the wire on the rails before. He achieves much more than he imagined.

Book IV: The Rail, Chapters 15-20 Analysis

David is a typical eight year old whose bad choices have now been exposed, but, worse, he has fomented suspicion on the part of his father that he is, in fact, the child of another. His innocence and his strong desire to find an identity and a place of belonging appear to have backfired in this world of harsh reality and forces which he cannot control. As David listens to the discourse between mother and father, however, perhaps

he begins to understand a bit about what experiences have shaped his father into the individual he is. David's guilt obviously outweighs his fear, for he finds the whip and gives it to father for his punishment. Clearly, these "sins" are such that even mother will not be able to provide protection from consequences. Once he has run from the home, however, he eventually goes to the river, the place at which he experienced his first spiritual awakening, seeking to create light in his world of darkness, perhaps cleansing himself in the way that the angel cleansed Isaiah.

Book IV: The Rail, Chapters 22-22

Book IV: The Rail, Chapters 22-22 Summary

As the regular evening activities take place along the riverfront, David throws the milk dipper onto the tracks and runs, expecting to see the flash of light. Because it has not landed in the correct spot to cause the electrical flash, he returns and sticks his toe into the ladle to pull it out and try again. Immediately, he is seared with an electric current, causing a huge flash. The street activity stops. The oncoming trolley car suffers a power drain. Those nearby adults see the child on the tracks and rush forward, rolling him off and onto the cobbles, using a stick to avoid electrocution themselves. Efforts to revive David are not successful until the ambulance arrives with an intern. Through this ordeal, David hallucinates, engaging in stream of consciousness thought, meshing all of his experiences and fears, culminating in the descent into a cellar, forced by his father, and finding coal that gives off light but which is neither hot nor cold.

David is revived and ultimately able to give his address. He is taken home by ambulance and carried up the stairs by a policeman, followed by onlookers and other building residents. David's mother responds as any mother would, and Albert is stunned, his face "blanching." For a moment, "David felt a shrill, wild, surge of triumph whip within him, triumph that his father stood slack-mouthed, finger-clawing, stooped..." (p. 589). The dictatorial stance and anger are gone from Albert, as he observes David's burned ankle and offers to go out for the ointment recommended by the doctor. David hears his father's "..dull, unresilient footfall across the kitchen floor...and a vague, remote pity stirred within his breast..." (p. 598).

Book IV: The Rail, Chapters 22-22 Analysis

Revenge is David's, in this final event. In his child's mind, he has triumphed over Albert, if only just this once. He is the one horribly injured, and it is Albert's furor and beating which has caused it. Albert is obviously feeling some of this as well, given his reaction and his offer to go for the medicine. As Albert leaves, however, David begins to feel pity. He understands, at some level, that his father is who he is because of all that he has experienced in his lifetime, just as anyone is. The reader is not left with the impression, however, that Albert has had some life-changing revelation that will transform his basic personality; the reality is, it probably will not. The best one might hope is that father may be more tolerant, and there may be a semblance of a truce. For David, some understanding has come. The image of his father forcing him down into a cellar and his discovery of bright coal that is neither hot nor cold is perhaps symbolic of the times. Life was neither jubilant nor horrible for these immigrant urban dwellers. It simply was - a neutral limbo in which each day passed into the next without thought of change.

Characters

David Schearl

The entire work is comprised of two years of David's young life, from the ages of six to eight. David arrived in America as a toddler, the son of Genya and Albert. He is settled into a New York City slum and becomes wholly dependent upon his mother for his safety, security and love. By age six, David is attending school and is allowed, indeed, encouraged, to venture out into the neighborhood and play with other children, also from immigrant families. It is during this period that David confronts the reality of poverty and slum life, as well as the rough and often vulgar existence of his peers and other adults. A sensitive and previously protected child, David is clearly traumatized by what he experiences. These experiences include a verbally and occasionally physically abusive father; an attempted molestation by a neighbor girl; the crass and crude activities of other children in the neighborhood; and the poor decision-making in an attempt to become acceptable. David is thoroughly conflicted, as he attempts to make sense of his world, to understand the spiritual beliefs of his Jewish faith, and to form some sense of identity in an environment that seems to be completely hostile. His insights seems to come during times of stream of consciousness thought, during which he attempts to process information and incidents and to synthesize these into some logical, orderly composite of meaning. By the end of the work, there is some sense that David is indeed growing. He has weathered the climactic crisis of lies and potentially deadly injury but has managed to develop some understanding of his father, and the reader is left with the sense that David will continue to pursue his identity in new and more mature ways.

Genya Schearl

Genya arrives in New York, following her husband who has been working there for many months. She brings their son, David, whom Albert has never seen. Genya is a shy, unassuming and subservient woman who settles into a flat and consumes herself with cooking, cleaning, and raising her one joy, David. As the plot progresses, much more is revealed of Genya, particularly her former life in Austria prior to her marriage. Genya had a love affair with a Christian church organist who had no goal to marry her. Instead, he married a wealthy woman who could promise him a life of leisure. When Genya's parents discovered the affair, they were obviously furious, particularly her father, who saw his daughter as now ruined by a "goy." An abusive and domineering man, he managed to marry Genya to a Jew who was probably not acceptable to most other families as a marriage partner. Genya has accepted her fate and, without romantic love, settles for the difficult life of Jewish immigrants in the early twentieth century. She pours all of her affection onto her son and, in the face of anger and bad temper of her husband, works solely to keep peace in the household and protect David. Though there is certainly much to criticize, Genya never confronts her husband Albert about his inability to maintain employment, his temper, or his abuse, until that abuse is directed

toward David. At this point, she draws a clear line, one that Albert does not again cross in her presence. Though a Jew, Genya's own concept of God and death are not orthodox, and it is difficult for her to discuss her spiritual beliefs with her son, and, though she does not attend synagogue regularly, Genya does maintain the Hebrew traditions in the household.

Albert Schearl

Albert has come to America in the early 1900's, a Jew from Austria and a printer by trade. After many months, he has sent for his wife, Genya and toddler son, David. Upon their arrival, he settles them into a tenement in a New York City slum, apparently not particularly joyous about their arrival. Albert is an angry, abusive man whose temper and inability to form appropriate relationships with his peers at work, cause him to lose one job after another. Eventually, he settles into employment at a printing shop and develops a good relationship with the foreman, Luter. Luter's sexual advances toward Genya, however, serve to sever this friendship and this, coupled with a serious hand injury, end Albert's employment. Albert then gains employment as a milkman, a far more successful position, because Albert is able to work by himself. His disposition, however, does not improve, and he is both verbally and physically abusive of David, much to Genya's horror.

David comes to hate his father and avoids him as much as possible. As the work progresses, Albert's history also comes to light, and the reader learns that he, too, was the victim of parental abuse, hating his father so much that when he is gored by a bull, Albert does nothing to assist his father, allowing him instead to die in the pen. This incident was well known in the surrounding villages of Austria, and no father would consider arranging a marriage with his daughter to Albert. His marriage to Genya, therefore, was a bit of a surprise to him and has caused a number of suspicions within Albert, all of which come to a head toward the end. Following the climax of the plot, moreover, it appears that Albert may have softened somewhat, if only temporarily, but the softening is viewed more as a defeat than a triumph. Albert, as any individual, is as much the product of his upbringing, and it is easy to see that he has become as his father.

Bertha

Bertha is Genya's sister who arrives from Austria and stays with the Schearls for several months. Bertha is the antithesis of Genya, a large, slovenly, brazen and loud woman, who speaks her mind and, in so doing, incurs the wrath of Albert. While Genya attempts to play "referee" between Bertha and Albert, they are both too outspoken to be distracted. Eventually, Bertha meets Nathan, a Russian Jewish widow with two pre-adolescent girls, and marries him, moving not far from Genya. Nathan and Bertha open a candy shop which Bertha runs while Nathan continues his job in a leggings factory. Bertha remains a crude and sloppy woman, although she has a special love for her

nephew, David. In fact, when David conspires with a friend who engages in sexual play with one of her step-daughters, Bertha attempts to protect David.

Joe Luter

Luter is from the same area in Austria as Albert and Genya. He is Albert's foreman at a printing shop and becomes a nightly dinner guest in the Schearl household. A bachelor, Luter clearly has designs on Genya, and these are sensed by both David and his mother. Luter attempts to visit the household when Albert is out, and, except for the final time, Genya manages to spurn his advances. Luter arrives at the Schearl household one afternoon, while David is outside and his father is at work. While the reader does not have the details, something obviously has occurred, because, after this visit, Luter does not return for dinner and he becomes cold to Albert at work. Luter leaves the picture entirely when Albert is injured and subsequently takes a job as a milkman, forcing the family to move to another section of the city.

Yussie Mink

Yussie and his mother and sister live above David in the first neighborhood. Yussie is an outgoing, typical urban slum child, loud, raucous, and insensitive. He attempts to befriend David, but, realizing that David is sensitive and shy, takes advantage of an opportunity to tease David and to encourage other boys to do the same.

Annie Mink

Annie is the disabled older sister of Yussie. While not specifically given, the reader is lead to believe that perhaps her leg is paralyzed from polio. Annie corners David during a period of play and takes him into the closet in order to engage in sexual play. David is horrified and avoids Annie from that point forward.

Leo Dugovka

Leo is a Christian lad, a bit older than David, who leads a wholly independent lifestyle. His father dead, and his mother employed full time, Leo is left to take care of himself every day. He also has store-bought toys, including a kite and skates, which David covets. Leo's promise of a rosary is enough of a bribe for David to lead Leo to Aunt Bertha's candy store and to step-daughter Esther, whom Leo lures into a cellar closet for sexual activity. Caught by Esther's sister, Leo takes off, and David realizes that Leo did not desire friendship at all.

Reb Yidel

Reb Yidel is a rabbi who runs cheder classes for young Jewish boys, as they learn to read and translate Hebrew, in preparation for bar mitzvah. He is both tyrannical and often ineffective, as the boys devise means to thwart him and spark his ire. The rabbi is extremely critical of this younger Jewish generation, insisting that they are all thugs and that they will come to no good. He finds some solace in David, however, who is able to read extremely well.

Izzy

Izzy is a bit of a leader of the neighborhood into which David moves when his father's job changes. He is probably a bit older than David and appears to be a typical street urchin, although he attends cheder lessons with David as well.

Objects/Places

Peter Stuyvesant

Steamer ship that carried Genya and David from Ellis Island to New York City.

Brownzeville

The neighborhood into which David first moves upon arrival in New York City.

Lower East Side

The New York City neighborhood to which David moves following his father's securing a job as a milkman.

East River

River close to David's apartment where the neighborhood children often play.

cheder

Name of school which Jewish boys attend to learn Hebrew and prepare for bar mitzvah.

Passover

Jewish holiday to celebrate deliverance from Egypt.

Ellis Island

Island adjacent to New York City and site of immigrant processing.

Dolman Press

The print shop where David's father works and where Luter is the foreman.

Tysmenicz

Village in Austria in which Albert was raised.

The Cellar

Name of Book I and the basement area of David's first housing tenement. David is greatly afraid of this dark, damp place, knowing that rats and other creatures abide there.

The Picture

Name of Book II and the purchase of Genya which reminds her of Austria. The picture is of corn and blue cornflowers, the significance of which is later revealed.

The Coal

Name of Book III. The nature of coal weighs heavily on David,once he hears that an angel cleansed Isaiah's mouth by burning it with coal. David wonders if angel coal could be white and not hot.

The Rail

Name of Book IV. The rail refers to the trolley rails by the East River onto which David throws a metal milk ladle, ultimately suffering a severe electric shock.

Themes

Loss of Innocence

America in the early twentieth century was a study of socioeconomic contrasts. Those of Western European heritage had been here for generations already and were well settled in their White Anglo-Saxon neighborhoods. The influx of "new" immigrants, that is, those from Ireland, Italy, and Eastern and Southern Europe, including a large number of Jews, brought a cultural shock to America's system. Languages, cultures, and religions were strange; acceptance of these newcomers was not forthcoming. These "new" immigrants settled into urban slums, living in tenements, finding work which was usually beneath their skills, and raising families in a wholly foreign environment.

As Albert stated, getting up and going outside onto the earth did not change a man; getting up and going outside onto pavement did. Into this environment were dropped children who, in their attempts to survive and discover some identity, grew up too fast and became as rough as the slums in which they lived. Though David's mother worked hard to protect her sensitive son from the realities of poverty and life in New York City, she was ultimately unable to do so. David was clearly traumatized by a barrage of incidents and events, ranging from physical and verbal abuse and introductions to the vulgarities of lust and sexual activity, to the loveless unions of adults who find life too harsh and unyielding to believe there could be marital joy.

Oedipal Relationships

The Oedipal relationship between mother and son has been a long-standing principle of psychiatry since Sigmund Freud. In general, it refers to the love of a young boy for his mother, so that he sees himself in competition with other males, usually the father, for mother's affection. This relationship between David and Genya is demonstrated in several ways throughout the work, and is a strong force in David's thoughts and feelings. First, he sees his father, quite correctly, as a tyrant and wishes that Albert would remain away more, allowing additional peaceful and comforting time with his mother. David looks to his mother as the soother of all of his pain, as the only individual who can allay his fears and provide safety and security. Albert's abusive personality, moreover, probably strengthens the Oedipal relationship. David seems to view himself and his mother as allies against Albert, as they share quiet understanding and the need to refrain from instigating Albert's ire. Second, David is clearly uncomfortable with Luter's constant presence in their home and his comments and actions directed toward Genya. While the reader is never given the details of Luter's surreptitious visit to Genya, David is clearly furious that another man has visited his mother and is convinced that Luter has taken sexual advantage of her. Later in the work, the reader witnesses David's horror and anger when he learns that the neighborhood boys have viewed his mother while bathing. "She's mine...mine...all mine!" he screams to himself, as he processes this incident. David's adamant position is that his mother belongs only to him.

Struggle for Identity

The classic "rite of passage" of all humans as they move from childhood through adolescence and into adulthood is certainly a common theme in literature throughout the world. Call It Sleep is no exception, as it traces two years in the childhood of David Schearl. David must move from the complete protection of his mother into an alien outside world of slum-dwelling children, into the tenuous development of a relationship with a harsh, tyrannical father, and into the need to blend the "old world" heritage of his parents with the new American urban culture of diversity and occasional vulgarity. The struggle of navigating these new challenges and forming some sense of an identity, as one traumatic experience follows another, forms a rich, tragic, at time humorous, and ultimately somewhat triumphant sojourn.

Against this backdrop of David's journey is the struggle of adults—new arrivals to America—who face the grim reality of poverty, underemployment, and non-acceptance. They search for their own identity as Americans, as they attempt to maintain the salient features of their heritage. Yet still they become a necessary part of a new society which is far more pluralistic and secular than they have known. While it would take several generations to achieve, the reader is nevertheless left with the impression that hope for the future is deep, and that the resiliency of basic human nature is universal.

Style

Point of View

While the work is written in the third person, the narrator is clearly telling the tale through the eyes of David. Detailed depictions of everyone's actions and all events are infused always with David's personal response - his thoughts, his confusion, his conclusions, and, most often, his emotions. The world of the poor immigrant in an urban slum, the crude and vulgar environment in which he lives, the assault of a harsh and and dreary existence, life with an angry and abusive father, and the singular security of a mother's love, are all witnessed and molded through the eyes of this sensitive, innocent, and fear-ridden child. Of the other major characters, the reader is able to grasp thorough pictures through their words and actions. Thus, Genya is portrayed as the mediator - the wife-mother-sister figure who fosters peaceful co-existence in her household and who, even in her submissiveness, refuses to allow her son to be victimized by Albert. Albert is portrayed as a paranoid abuser, not through any insights into his thinking but, rather, through his words and actions. Indeed, the reader does not need entry into the thoughts of others, for it is David who weaves this tale and David who becomes the window through which all else is told.

Setting

New York City in the early twentieth century was clearly the "melting pot" depicted in American history textbooks. Here, in the urban squalor of a variety of neighborhoods lived the "new" immigrants, those having come from Eastern and Southern Europe, as well as Russia and Ireland. Steeped in their cultural and religious traditions and yet yearning for a place in their new home, these individuals faced discrimination, menial employment with long hours and low wages, substandard tenement housing, and yet a steadfastness which, for most, eventually paid off for their future offspring. Through wonderful and rich detail of homes, shared bathrooms, poorly paved streets and sewer systems, to the pushcarts, shops, taverns, and schools of New York City in the early-1900s, Roth has painted a credible and accurate picture of life in the early urban slums of America. Life was hard, children grew up quickly, and parents could only hope that America for their children and grandchildren would be better than it was for them. Within this squalor, however, there was the strong need to maintain ethnic and religious traditions. Thus, Genya and Albert celebrated the sabbath with appropriate meals and kept the Jewish holiday traditions. Thus, David attended cheder and learned the Hebrew of the Old Testament. Leo's Christian mother adorned her walls with pictures and figures of Jesus. In the midst of hardship and labor, moreover, there was the resiliency that only comes with hope for the future.

Language and Meaning

Perhaps the most forceful element of Call It Sleep is the language. Author Roth has managed to achieve an exquisite blend of old and new world languages, a blend which serves to authenticate the work for the reader. Genya and Albert speak Yiddish and German, most of which David is able to understand. Genya and Bertha also speak Polish, and do so frequently when they do not wish David to understand. At cheder, the students read Old Testament passages in original Hebrew, and David is a natural, able to master the pronunciation with ease. Both Genya and David are attempting to learn more English, of course, and their mispronunciation of words is a wonderful source of humor throughout the work. Added to all of the "old world" language is the street slang of the children and lower class Americans. In explaining why he has a rat trap, for example, Yussie says to David, "See, I tol' yuh I had sumtin tuh show yuh. See, like dot it closes...We didn't hea' it, caus ev'ybody wuz sleepin'. Rats on'y cum out innuh de'k, w'en yuh can't see 'em, and yuh know w'ea dy comin' f'om, dy comin' f'om de cellah. Dot's w'ea dy live innuh cellah - all rats."

The policeman, on the other hand, speaks a more "correct" English. Roth's goal, through the use of language, is to further depict the vast diversity of groups housed within David's world and, indeed, within early twentieth century America.

Structure

Call It Sleep is divided into four "books," each with a title of significant meaning in David's life. Book I, "The Cellar," focuses on David's fears and complete dependency upon his mother for protection. By the end of this book, David has forced himself to go into the cellar to hide and, while not overcoming his fear, he has at least faced it and survived.

Book II, "The Picture," gives a continued picture of David's introverted and sensitive nature, and his continued loss of innocence as he learns the significance of the picture his mother has purchased and placed upon the kitchen wall.

"The Coal," (Book III) focuses on David's search for spiritual meaning, as he ponders the nature of God and the Old Testament teachings of his cheder classes. By the age of eight, David is attempting to become more independent, and "The Rail" depicts him as longing for an identity and a means by which he may alter his relationship and competition with his father, specifically through some triumph over him. Though the entire work is chronological, the books are of vastly different lengths, as the themes of each warrant. Thus, "The Rail," which holds the most significant rising action, the climax and the denouement, is fully half of the entire work, housing the greatest number of chapters.

Historical Context

Manhattan's Lower East Side

Much of *Call It Sleep* is set in the Lower East Side of Manhattan in New York City. The area has a rich history stemming largely from its substantial immigrant population and its unique origins. Although New York City consists of four other boroughs in addition to Manhattan, this area is often considered to be the heart and core of the city from an economic and geographic standpoint.

The island of Manhattan, which is separated from mainland New York by the Hudson, East, and Harlem Rivers, was settled by the Dutch in the 1620s after it was purchased from a local American Indian tribe by representative Peter Minuit. The settlement was named New Amsterdam, and it operated under Dutch rule until the region was turned over to England fifty years later. The terms of England's annexation allowed the region to retain much of its tolerant cultural heritage, a feature that would later result in the area being viewed as a "melting pot" of various cultures.

The Lower East Side of Manhattan in particular served as the repository for many of the immigrants that journeyed to America in search of freedom and opportunity throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The island's population peaked around 1910 with well over 2.5 million residents, many of whom lived in tenements found on the Lower East Side. In addition to its substantial immigrant population, the Lower East Side has served as an important center for the arts, as well as a nexus for many activist political movements.

American Immigrants in the Early Twentieth Century

The New York depicted in Henry Roth's *Call It Sleep* is a New York shaped by the rapid influx of immigrants during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In the novel, Roth refers to 1907, the year in which David and his mother Genya Schearl arrive in America, as "the year that was destined to bring the greatest number of immigrants to the shores of the United States."

Immigration to the United States was negligible prior to the middle of the nineteenth century. After that, Western and Northern Europeans began immigrating to the United States in waves prompted by various economic and agricultural conditions in their respective homelands. For example, hundreds of thousands of Irish immigrants rushed to the United States during the great potato famine that struck their home country during the 1840s.

By the late nineteenth century, the demographics of European immigrants had shifted so that the majority were traveling from Southern and Eastern Europe, most notably Italy and Poland. Nearly all these immigrants entered the United States through New York City and its well-known Ellis Island immigration station, which opened in 1892.

Jews from many nations, especially Russia, fled to the United States during the early 1900s to avoid pogroms, or race-motivated attacks, directed at them by various anti-Semitic groups.

The massive influx of European immigrants was reduced in the 1910s and 1920s when stricter laws were passed by the U.S. Congress, limiting their numbers based first on literacy skills, and later based on quotas established for each originating country. This latter method is still in use today. Despite the popular notion of America as a "melting pot," the population of the United States has never consisted of more than 15 percent foreign-born residents at any time during its history.

Critical Overview

Call It Sleep was Henry Roth's first novel, published in 1934 when the author was just twenty-eight years old. Critical reception of the book was overwhelmingly positive, particularly for a first novel, but coming as it did in the midst of the Great Depression, the book failed to make a dramatic impact on the reading public and literary scholars until decades later.

One of the novel's most laudatory reviews appeared in a February 1935 edition of *Books*, and was written by F. T. Marsh. Marsh calls the book "the most accurate and profound study of an American slum childhood that has yet appeared." Marsh's praise continues:

To discerning readers, I believe, for its profound intensity, its rare virtuosity, its sensitive realism, its sheer weight, its power, circumference and depth, this first novel of this Mr. Roth will be remembered for some time to come. I should like to see *Call It Sleep* win the Pulitzer Prize—which it never will.

Other reviewers share many of Marsh's sentiments. A reviewer credited simply as S. A. L., writing for the *Boston Transcript*, calls it "an exceptional book, full of intelligent observation and sympathetic character study." Horace Gregory, in a review for the *Nation*, calls it "a first novel of extraordinary character," and "an experience which few readers of contemporary fiction can afford to ignore." In a review for the *New Republic*, Paul Wren asserts that the book is "packed with rare powers and densities."

Reviewers who were more critical focused primarily on a few specific aspects of the novel. For example, Lewis Gannett, in a mostly positive review for the *New York Herald Tribune*, calls the book "agonizingly real," and cautions, "Some readers who might be drawn to Mr. Roth's book will be shocked by his honest use of street language." In a review for the *New York Times*, H. W. Boynton writes, "The book lays all possible stress on the nastiness of the human animal." He calls the novel "a fine book deliberately and as it were doggedly smeared with verbal filthiness." Joseph Gollomb, writing for the *Saturday Review of Literature*, levels the most serious charges, stating that the book "does violence to the truth" and calling it "by far the foulest picture of the east side that has yet appeared, in conception and in language."

Even with substantially positive reviews, however, the book was published in what Alfred Kazin, in his introduction to the novel, calls "that most unpromising year at the bottom of the Great Depression." As David Kirby notes in his review of *Redemption: The Life of Henry Roth* by Steven G. Kellman, it was a time when "relatively few readers were interested in throwing their disposable cash at an unknown writer, especially one with so troubling a story to tell, and within two years *Call It Sleep* was out of print."

The book was not completely forgotten, however, and a growing interest in the canon of Jewish American literature during the 1960s led to the novel's rediscovery by a new generation of readers. A 1964 paperback edition of *Call It Sleep* became the first

paperback reviewed by the *New York Times*, and the book—three decades after its first publication—finally became a bestseller. It has remained steadily popular ever since, and it is considered by many scholars to be an essential classic of Jewish American literature.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1

Critical Essay #1

In the following excerpt, Kazin explores Roth's depiction of Jewish immigrants, particularly their language, as they adjust to their new home in New York in Call it Sleep.

Call It Sleep is the most profound novel of Jewish life that I have ever read by an American. It is a work of high art, written with the full resources of modernism, which subtly interweaves an account of the worlds of the city gutter and the tenement cellar with a story of the overwhelming love between a mother and son. It brings together the darkness and light of Jewish immigrant life before the First World War as experienced by a very young boy, really a child, who depends on his imagination alone to fend off a world so immediately hostile that the hostility begins with his own father.

Henry Roth's novel was first published in 1934, at the bottom of the Great Depression. Looking at the date and marveling at this book, which apparently consumed so much of Roth's central experience that he never published another novel, many readers will be astonished. Surely the depressed 1930s produced little else but "proletarian literature" and other forms of left-wing propaganda? A fashionable critic writing in the opulent years after 1945 scorned the 1930s as an "imbecile decade," and explained—with the usual assurance of people who are comfortably off—that the issues in literature are "not political, but moral." Anyone who thinks "political" issues and "moral" ones are unrelated is living in a world very different from the 1930s or the 1990s.

The art fever of the modernist 1920s, in which more first-rate work was produced than in any other single period of American literature, continued well into the 1930s and did not fade until Hitler's war. Henry Roth, twenty-eight when *Call It Sleep* was published, was as open to the many strategies of modernism as he was to political insurgency. (The book owes a great deal to the encouragement of Eda Lou Walton, a remarkable woman who was teaching modern literature at New York University.)

Though *Call It Sleep* was not adequately understood or welcomed until it was reissued in paperback in 1964, it has become popular throughout the world with millions of copies in print. We can see now that the book belongs to the side of the 1930s that still believed that literature was sacred, whether or not it presumed to change the world. Those who identify the 1930s with works of political protest forget that it was the decade of the best of Faulkner's novels, from *The Sound and the Fury* to *The Wild Palms*, Eliot's *Ash Wednesday*, Hart Crane's *The Bridge*, Dos Passos's *U.S.A.*, Katherine Anne Porter's *Flowering Judas*, Edmund Wilson's *Axel's Castle*, Fitzgerald's *Tender is the Night*, Henry Miller's *Tropic of Cancer*, Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, Thornton Wilder's *Our Town*, Nathanael West's *The Day of the Locust*, Richard Wright's *Native Son*, Hemingway's *For Whom the Bell Tolls*.

What *Call It Sleep* has in common with these works is its sense of art sustaining itself in a fallen world, in a time of endless troubles and of political and social fright. The world was visibly shaking under the blows of economic catastrophe, mob hysteria, the fascist domination of much of Europe, fear of another world war. And no one was likely to feel

the burden of the times more keenly than a young Jew starting life in a Yiddish-speaking immigrant family and surrounded by the physical and human squalor of the Lower East Side.

That last sentence could describe Michael Gold in his autobiography *Jews Without Money*, an eloquent but primitive outpouring of emotion that concludes with a rousing call to communism as the new Messiah. What from the very beginning makes *Call It Sleep* so different from the usual grim realism of Lower East Side novels is the intractable bitterness of the immigrant father, Albert Schearl, toward his wife, Genya, and their little boy, David. The father is an uncompromisingly hostile workingman, a printer by trade, driven from one shop to another by his ugly temper. "They look at me crookedly, with mockery in their eyes! How much can a man endure? May the fire of God consume them!" Roth makes this complaint sound loftier than it would have in Albert Schearl's Yiddish. He has been driven almost insane by his memory and resentment of his wife's affair with a Gentile back in Austrian Galicia. It pleases him to suspect that David is not his son.

This obsession, the dramatic foundation and background of the novel, may not be enough to explain Albert's unrelenting vituperation of his wife and his rejection, in every small family matter, of the little boy. David is not just unloved; he is violently hated by his father. The father shudderingly regards him as a kind of untouchable. The boy not only depends exclusively and feverishly on his mother but, in the moving story of his inner growth, becomes a determined pilgrim searching for light away from his tenement cellar refuge whose darkness pervades the first section of the novel, away from the dark cave in which the father has imprisoned mother and son.

Albert Schearl is at times so frenzied in his choked-up bitterness and grief that the introspection at the heart of his son's character—the boy wanders the neighborhood and beyond in search of a way out—must be seen as the only rebellion open to him. Whatever the sources of Albert Schearl's madly sustained daily war on his wife and son—he is perhaps less a jealous husband than a crazed immigrant unable to feel at home in the New World—Roth's honesty in putting the man's hatefulness at the center of the book is remarkable. It reminds us that the idealizing of the family in Jewish literature can be far from actual facts. Jews from Eastern Europe did not always emigrate because of anti-Semitism. The enmity sometimes lay within the family itself, as has been known to happen everywhere. Instead of sentimentalizing the family situation, Roth turned husband, wife, and son into the helpless protagonists of an obvious and uncompromising Oedipal situation. I can think of no other novel except D. H. Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers* in which mother and son are so fiercely tied to each other. The father is the outsider he has made of himself, and plainly wants to be.

In *Sons and Lovers* (as in lesser works on the same theme) the father is extraneous because he has lost for the mother the sexual charm that first attracted her. In *Call It Sleep* Genya timidly loves Albert for all his brutality. She is prepared to love him more freely if only he would stop berating her, but he is so unremittingly nasty that he virtually forces mother and son on each other. Albert in his daily rage somehow reflects his unconscious bitterness at being held down in "the Golden Land." But it is also clear that,

notwithstanding Albert's dominating airs, Genya married him because she had no other choice. Her father had disowned her for her past infatuation with a Gentile.

Albert's war against his wife and son sounds an alarm at the very opening of the novel that continues to dominate these three lives until the last possible moment, when the shock produced when David is burned in a bizarre accident brings about a necessary but inconclusive pause in Albert's war on his family.

The book begins in 1907, the peak year of immigration to the United States. Wife and son have just been delivered from the immigration station at Ellis Island to be greeted by a somber, frowning Albert. Not in the least prepared to be amiable, he is quickly incensed because his wife doesn't recognize him without his mustache.

The truth was there was something quite untypical about their behavior … These two stood silent, apart; the man staring with aloof, offended eyes grimly down at the water—or if he turned his face toward his wife at all, it was only to glare in harsh contempt at the blue straw hat worn by the child in her arms, and then his hostile eyes would sweep about the deck to see if anyone else was observing them. And his wife beside him regarding him uneasily, appealingly. And the child against her breast looking from one to the other with watchful, frightened eyes … The woman, as if driven by the strain into action, tried to smile, and touching her husband's arm said timidly, "And this is the Golden Land." She spoke in Yiddish.

Astonished by her husband's haggard appearance, Genya apologizes for not having known him instantly. With the gentleness that she sustains in all the many crises he creates; she says, "You must have suffered in this land." Indeed he has, and will continue to suffer from himself in a way that turns his harshness into their immediate, their most perilous environment. Albert is his wife's only New York. She never attempts to learn English; she is content just to look after her family and is afraid to move beyond the streets of her neighborhood. Her deepest feeling for Albert is not the passion which unsettles him but a concern that comes from a sense of duty. Anything else would be unthinkable to her. Deprived of actual love, since Albert's quarrelsomeness isolates her, she is free to give her entire soul to her little boy.

Call It Sleep is not a naturalist novel, in which character is shaped largely by environment. Jews are generally so conscious of the pressure of history that it was a notable achievement for Henry Roth, coming out of the Lower East Side at a time when it was routine for people to dream of transforming the "conditions" in which they found themselves, to see character as more important than environment. As lower New York in the teens of our century comes alive in David Schearl's anxious but eager consciousness, Roth presents the city not in an external documentary but as formed, instant by instant, out of David's perceptions. David Schearl is portrait of the artist as a very small boy. In this novel we are in the city-world not of *Sister Carrie* but of Joyce's *Ulysses*.

He also shows that Genya's enveloping tenderness toward her son is not just "Freudian," theoretical, but a protectiveness that is a part of Jewish history. Its key is the

Yiddish that mother and son speak together. David's English is made to sound effortlessly noble, beautifully expressive, almost liturgical, by contrast with the gutteral street English that surrounds him. We are startled to hear him speak a horrible mutilated street dialect when he is away from Mama. Then he is with strangers; and in this novel of New York, English is the stranger, the adopted language, tough and brazen. It expresses the alienation from the larger world of kids competing with each other in toughness. "Land where our fodders died" becomes a parody of a national hymn that shows how derivative and meaningless the line can be when sung by immigrant street urchins.

The young David, searching for experience beyond his immediate neighborhood, discovers that he is "losted," and he tells a baffled woman who cannot make out where the boy lives, "A hunner 'n' twenny six Boddeh Stritt." Later in the novel David is enchanted by the Polish boy Leo flying a kite from the roof. Like Tom Sawyer encountering Huckleberry Finn, David is astounded by the boy's freedom. Hoping to see this marvel again, David asks, "Yuh gonna comm up hea alluh time?" Leo carelessly explains; "Naw! I hangs out on wes elevent'. Dat's w'ea we lived 'fore we moved."

Maybe street kids once talked this way, maybe not. Roth caricatures the terrible English of the street—a "foreign," external, cold-hearted language—in order to bring out the necessary contrast with the Yiddish spoken at home. This is the language of the heart, of tradition, of intimacy. Just as Roth perhaps overdoes the savage English spoken in the street, so he deliberately exalts the Yiddish that he translates at every point into splendid, almost too splendid, King James English. Even when Albert almost comes to blows with his vulgarly outspoken sister-in-law Bertha, he cries out: "I'm pleading with you as with Death!" Storming at his son, he menacingly demands "Shudder when I speak to you!" The English doesn't convey the routine, insignificant weight of the word for "shudder" in Yiddish. The people speaking Yiddish in this book are not cultivated people carefully choosing their words. They are hard-pressed, keyed-up, deeply emotional. There is nothing about the lives in the "Golden Land" that is not arduous, strange, even threatening. So they talk as extremely vulnerable Yiddish speakers from the immigrant working class have always done. It is a verbal style, even a routine, in which people expostulate with one another as if they were breaking all the windows in order to let a little air into the house.

Source: Alfred Kazin, "The Art of *Call It Sleep*," in *The New York Review of Books*, Vol. 38, No. 15, October 10, 1991, p.15.

Quotes

She lifted the sobbing child to her breast, pressed him against her. With a vacant stunned expression, her gaze wandered from the grim smoldering face of her husband to the stern of the ship. In the silvery-green wake that curved trumpet-wise through the water, the blue hat still bobbed and rolled, ribbon stretched out on the waves. Tears sprang to her eyes. She brushed them away quickly, shook her head as if shaking off the memory, and looked toward the bow. Before her the grimy cupolas and towering square walls of the city loomed up. Above the jagged roof tops, the white smoke, whitened and suffused by the slanting sun, faded into the slots and wedges of the sky. She pressed her brow against her child's, hushed him with whispers. This was that vast incredible land, the land of freedom, of immense opportunity, that Golden Land. Again, she tried to smile. (p. 11)

David never said anything to anyone of what he had discovered, not even to his mother - it was all too terrifying, too unreal to share with someone else. He brooded about it till it entered his sleep, till he no longer could tell where his father was flesh and where dream. Who would believe him if he said, I saw my father lift a hammer; he was standing on a high roof of darkness, and below him were faces uplifted, so many, they stretched like white cobbles to the end of the world; who would believe him? He dared not. (p. 30)

He nodded. Without knowing why, her last words stirred him. What he had failed to grasp as thought, her last gesture, the last supple huskiness of her voice conveyed. Was it in his heart this dreamlike fugitive sadness dwelled, or did it steep the feathery air of the kitchen? He could not tell. But if only the air were always this way, and he always here alone with his mother. He was near her now. He was part of her. he rain outside the window set continual seals upon their isolation, upon their intimacy, their identity. When she lifted the stove lid, the rosy glow that stained her wide brow warmed his own body as well. He was near her. He was part of her. Oh, it was good being here. He watched her every movement hungrily. (pp. 84-5)

David shed his coat, found a chair and listened morosely to the sounds in the bedroom. From the drift of the occasional words, snatched of phrases, exclamations that rose like crests above their low tones, he knew their conversation was not only about him, but about the night before. His mother was explaining, he guessed, where she had been, why she had gone. Of Luter, he could hear no mention made. He divined that no mention would be made. (p. 145)

For awhile, David listened intently to the sound of the words. It was Hebrew, he knew, the same mysterious language his mother used before the candles, the same his father used when he read from a book during the holidays - and that time before drinking wine. Not Yiddish, Hebrew. God's tongue, the rabbi had said. If you knew it, then you could talk to God. Who was He? He would learn about Him now—(p. 286)

It took more than luck though, as David very well knew. It took a great deal of patience. He had tried that method of collecting lollipop sticks himself, but it had proved too tedious. Anyway he didn't really have to do it. He happened to be bright enough to avoid punishment, and could read Hebrew as fast as anyone, although he still didn't know what he read. Translation, which was called Chumish, would come later. (p. 294)

Terrified, rigid, David watched the tug wallow by. Ages seemed to pass, but in spite of himself he could not move. Twice he sighed and with such depth as though he had been weeping for hours. And with the suddenness of snapping fetters the spell broke, and he stared about him too unsteady to rise. What was it he had seen? He couldn't tell now. It was as though he had seen it in another world, a world that once left could not be recalled. All that he knew about it was that it had been complete and dazzling. (p. 334)

David shrank away. He hated fights. Why did the have to fight and spoil everything? But before the two pugilists had time to fly at each other, a loud, imperious rapping startled them all. They stared at the gutter. With a cry David recoiled. Poised on the side step of the milk wagon, sleeveless shirt dazzling in the light, his father was rapping the butt-end of the whip against the wagon — "Come here!" He bit off the Yiddish words. (p. 369)

He looked from the street to his father. Too tall for the wagon, he stooped forward, black reins loose in weathered hand. Nothing about him ever changed. Let worlds heave and freeze, he remained the same - always the thin inscrutable mouth, always the harsh pride of taut nostrils, heavy lidded eyes. Under the sheer, unswerving steep of his aloofness, there was shelter sometimes, but never foothold. (p. 371)

The crunch of heels upon the gravel. Terror! His eyes snapped open. Dwarfed between the huge gas tanks, his father rounded the path. Eyes downcast as always, he hurried, jangling the empty grey bottles in their trays. Louder, louder, nearer, they seemed to clank in David's heart as well. With every step his father took, the breath in his own body became more labored, more suffocating. At the wagon he paused, lifted sombre eyes to heave the trays on board. Their gaze met. The first tray hung poised a split second before it came to rest. "What's the matter?" David began to weep. (p. 377)

Something, something had happened. He sat dumbly down, watched the others a moment, then turned away. Their bickering and their chatter had lost dimenbsion; nothing was left but a grey and vacuous idiocy, a world bewitched and hollow. It was as though he heard all sounds through a yawn or with water in his ears, as though he saw all things through a tumbler. When would it burst, this globe about his senses. If only he had run home first, if only he had told his mother. (p. 383)

He was silent. Somehow he couldn't quite believe that it was for memory's sake only that his father had bought this trophy. Somehow looking at the horns, guessing the enormous strength of the beast who must have owned them, there seemed to be another reason. He couldn't quite fathom it though...He sensed only that in the horns, in the poised power of them lay a threat, a challenge he must answer, he must meet. But he didn't know how. (p. 405)

He went out, the door closing on Leo's final chuckle. And he groped toward the dim stairs and descended. Hope and fear and confusion had drained him of thought. His mind was numb and suspended now, as though he were drowsy with cold. Without word, without image, he sensed again the past and the future converging on the morrow. And either he found a solvent for his fears or he was lost. He walked into the dreary rain as into an omen...(p. 445)

He had run and run, and now his own breath stabbed his lungs like a knife and his legs grew so heavy, they seemed to lift the sidewalk with them. Tottering with exhaustion, he dropped into a panicky, stumbling walk, clawed at his stockings, gasping so hoarsely, people turned to stare. Only one thought in the screaming chaos of terror and revulsion his mind had fallen into remained unbroken: To reach the cheder - to lose himself among the rest...Now he ran, now he walked, now he ran again. And always the single goal before him - the cheder yard, the carefree din of the cheder. And always the single burden: Like I never came! Lik I never came! (p. 486)

Topics for Discussion

In many ways, the Schearl family dynamic would be termed "dysfunctional" in modern psychological language. In what ways is this family dysfunctional?

Contrast the personalities of David and Yussie. Why do you think that both boys, who share the same immigration experience, are so different?

Manh of David's contacts with the outside world are disastrous. Describe two that you believe to be the most disastrous, evaluating their impact on David.

Albert can be seen as suffering from paranoia. Cite specific examples from the plot that support this.

David can be described as rather impulsive in situations of strong emotions. Describe three incidents which result in impulsive behavior. Why does he not simply return to his mother's protection during these times?

The imagery of God as "light" occurs in several spots. Delineate these with respect to David's perception of God and his final attempt to find God by "creating" light himself.

Discuss Genya's view of death. What is David's reaction to death and to his mother's view?

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Novels for Students (NfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's"For Students" Literature line, NfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on "classic" novels frequently

studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of NfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of NfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of "classic" novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members—educational professionals— helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in NfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed—for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man–the character is listed as "The Narrator" and alphabetized as "Narrator." If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. • Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name "Jean Louise Finch" would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname "Scout Finch."
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by NfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an “at-a-glance” comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author’s time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

NfS includes “The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,” a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children’s Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Novels for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Novels for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Novels for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from NfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

"Night." Novels for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234–35.

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Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on "Winesburg, Ohio." Novels for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335–39.

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Malak, Amin. "Margaret Atwood's "The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition," Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9–16; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133–36.

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Adams, Timothy Dow. "Richard Wright: "Wearing the Mask," in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69–83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59–61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Novels for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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