Canada: A Novel Study Guide

Canada: A Novel by Richard Ford

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Plot Summary

The following version of this book was used to create this study guide: Ford, Richard. Canada. Ecco, 2012.

Canada begins with the narrator, Dell Parsons, who is now an English teacher in his 60s and about to retire, recalling the events of a short few months in 1960 when he was 15 years old. He alludes to the crimes of bank robbery that his parents committed, as well as some mysterious murders that occurred afterwards, but these unfold as the novel progresses.

Dell was the son of Bev Parsons, a bombardier in the Navy, and Neeva Parsons, a frustrated intellectual and teacher. He had a twin sister Berner, with whom he has mostly a close relationship though it could be uneven at times. Although his parents seemed to love each other for the most part, Dell remained convinced that they never should have gotten married, but they did so because of one sexual encounter that produced him and his twin sister. He attributed this mismatch to the reason that they eventually robbed a bank and ended up in prison.

The Parsons lived in Great Falls, Montana, and they had lived a scattered and unstable life because Bev had been repeatedly stationed at one Air Force base or another. In order to make extra money, Bev, an unsuccessful car salesman, became involved in a scheme with some of the Native Americans to steal and slaughter cattle from local ranchers, and sell the quality meat at a good price. At one point, as Bev functioned as the middle man between the Indians and the railroad porter to whom he sold the meat, he encountered some trouble and ended up owing the Indians money he did not have. He decided to rob a bank to pay off the debt as well as to have some extra money to provide for his family. He and his wife Neeva drove to western North Dakota to rob a bank. As the drama unfolded, Bev realized he had made a big mistake, since the bank personnel and patrons reacted underwhelmingly to his gun-wielding and threatening appearance. He stole $2,500, much less than the $10,000 he intended. For a little while, the Parsons thought the crime went undetected, and they planned to live a much more stable and quiet domestic life. Two police officers showed up one day, however, arrested them and took them to jail.

No police or juvenile officers came to look after Dell and Berner and place them in foster care or an orphanage. The children decided to visit their parents in jail and afterwards Berner ran away to San Francisco to meet up with her boyfriend Rudy while a family friend, Mildred Remlinger, drove Dell to Saskatchewan to live with her brother, the strange and enigmatic Arthur Remlinger. Dell lived in a shack on Arthur’s property and worked with Charley Quarters, a violent and predatory-like man whom Dell feared, to assist the Americans who came to hunt geese in the fall. Arthur impressed Dell in a way —he characterized him as “consistent” since it was a quality he had not previously encountered in the people in his life—but Arthur remained aloof. Dell wondered why Arthur never spoke to him, but Dell’s interaction with Arthur gradually increased. He then moved into the Leonard, the hotel that Arthur owned, to clean the rooms for the

truckers and hunters who mostly stayed there because Arthur's girlfriend, Florence La Blanc, did not think it was appropriate for some of the older hunters to stay with Dell in his shack. Dell struggled with the fact of his parents' crime and his loneliness, but managed to create the semblance of a stable life for himself. While cleaning Arthur's rooms one day in the Leonard, Dell found a pistol Arthur owned, and soon thereafter Charley told Dell the whole story about Arthur Remlinger.

Originally from Michigan, Arthur attended Harvard but when he could no longer afford it, begged for a scholarship. His professors refused to help him because of his reactionary political views. He left Harvard and moved to Elmira, New York and joined a group of like-minded anti-unionists who persuaded him to drive and leave a car bomb behind a union building in Detroit. The bomb exploded and killed a union leader, so Arthur fled to Canada as a fugitive. He connected with a German sympathizer who owned the Leonard and worked for him until the German's death when he inherited the property. Now, years later, two men from Detroit arrived to confront Arthur about his crime.

Jepps and Crosley seemed not to have a real plan, but Arthur feared his concealment had come to an end. Arthur anointed Dell his "special son" whom he could exploit in connection with the killings of the two Americans. Arthur then drove Dell in the blizzard to the shack on his property and murdered Jepps and Crosley while Dell waited in the car. Although not in the shack when Arthur shot them, Dell saw the crime but could not hear it, and the soundless pantomime-like violence of the crime terrified him. Dell helped Charley and another man bury the bodies in the fields where the Americans came to shoot geese, and ironically noted that if Jepps and Crosley had lived, they would be hunting on that same spot the next day.

Florence then arranged for Dell to take a bus to Winnipeg to live with her son Roland. In Winnipeg, he attended high school, graduated, went to college, became a naturalized Canadian citizen, married and moved to Windsor where he now teaches English at a high school. He often has his students read Thomas Hardy's novel The Mayor of Casterbridge because of its bleak fatalism, and it also addresses Dell's feeling that he has somehow avoided punishment for his peripheral role in the murders of the two Americans.

After moving to Winnipeg, he eventually learned that his mother had committed suicide while in prison and that his sister Berner is now dying of cancer. He visits her in the Twin Cities in Minnesota. She has lived an unsettled life, but their bittersweet reunion leaves Dell with a small sense of resolution. Berner dies and the whereabouts or outcome of Bev, Arthur, Charley and the others remain unknown to him. Dell tells no one, except his wife Clare, about the murders of the two Americans, and believes that on some strange cosmic level that he will have to pay for his involvement in the crime of Arthur Remlinger.

Part 1, Chapters 1-3

Summary

In Chapter 1, Dell Parsons, the narrator, recounts how his parents arrived at the startling decision to rob a bank, after which some murders occurred. He begins his story by providing lengthy descriptions of his parents.

Born in 1923 in Alabama, his father, Bev Parsons, possessed good looks and a Southern charm that easily endeared him to people. During the 1940s, he joined the Air Force and became a bombardier, though his career in the military proved to be, according to his son, more ordinary than spectacular. After he returned from duty, he met Neeva Kamper, the narrator's mother, with whom he had a quick sexual encounter that resulted in the birth of the narrator. They get married even though they could not be more unlike one another. Neeva was the daughter of intellectual Jewish parents who graduated from college at the age of 18, wrote poetry, spoke French, and came across as rather bohemian in both her appearance and behavior. Her parents frowned upon the marriage since they considered her husband beneath her, but, despite their differences, Dell concludes that they had always seemed to love each other.

Chapter 2 establishes the setting of the novel as Great Falls, Montana, which his mother disparagingly described as "just cows and wheat out here" with "no real organized society" (9) in 1960 when Dell and his fraternal twin sister Berner are 15 years old. Dell and his sister had little social interaction outside of junior high, since their mother did not want them associating with the locals, whom she considered inferior and provincial, and who remained suspicious of those who temporarily lived at the military base. Despite their mother's opposition, Dell and Berner tried to find a sense of place as they were continually uprooted, and for Dell that became school. His desire to stay in school and his fear of not being able to attend school as his family moved from one base to another—he feared his family would end up in some place like Guam "where there would be no school for me at all" (11)—gave Dell a feeling of solidity he would otherwise lack as his family's constant relocations forced him to begin anew once again.

Dell's father Bev left the military in Chapter 3 to become a car salesman. Although Bev knew little about selling cars, his son explains, he was a natural salesman because of his personality and Southern ways that made people trust him for some reason. Dell's mother Neeva began teaching fifth grade while he and his sister Berner were about to begin high school. Although fraternal twins, Dell and Berner did not attend the same grade since, as Dell explains, "it was considered unhealthy for twins to be together all the time" (14); and while Dell tried to ground himself, Berner grew moody and brooding as she isolated herself in her room to read scandalous novels such as Peyton Place and became conscious of her homely looks. Bev left his job selling new cars in order to sell used ones, and one day in June he arrived home and announced that he planned on starting a new job selling farms and ranch land. In retrospect, Dell concludes how the

unpredictability of his family's life influenced the bad choices his parents eventually made.

Analysis

In Canada, Richard Ford explores how the polar opposites of the mismatched couple Bev and Neeva Parsons result in the ruin of their family, thus highlighting how destructive social constraints that tacitly require them to marry because Neeva becomes pregnant with twins can be. Significantly, Bev and Neeva have no more children after Dell and Berner, who are born as a result of that single sexual encounter. The complexity of the descriptions of Dell's parents renders them highly realistic characters who should have never glanced at one another, let alone marry; but Ford also celebrates Bev's and Neeva's diversity, which Dell, as the narrator, appreciates. Although Berner and he are fraternal twins, they grow apart whereas Dell perceives in himself desirable qualities of both his mother and father. He thus figures as somewhat more grounded and secure than his sister, though he insists that, despite his emergent maturity, his parents' marriage is "like a long proof in mathematics in which the first calculation is wrong, following which all other calculations move you further away from how things were when they first made sense" (7).

Bev's decision to leave the Air Force which, despite being the cause of the family's geographic instability, only contributes to Neeva's dissatisfaction and the twins' lack of a real adolescence. Dell explains how "because of our mother's growing alienation, her reclusiveness, her feeling of superiority and her desire that Berner and I not assimilate into the 'market-town mentality'…we didn't have a life like most children, which might've involved friends to visit, a paper route, Scouts and dances" (9). Dell, however, likes Great Falls, and his natural curiosity leads him to explore the town and admire what little it does have to offer. This malleability serves as a way to avoid his father's capriciousness and his mother's stubbornness, and he, as well as Berner, adapt to their new lives as a result of having had to move so much. Dell tries to act like the other boys and excels at school since it has been the only "continual thread in life besides my parents and sister" (10). He fears that his chaotic life will somehow prevent him from attending school and acquiring knowledge (as the Guam reference indicates). He attributes this fear to his recognition of his mother's stymied and frustrated intellectual and social life as well as the fact that his parents have not provided him and his sister a secure footing. In the end, however, he concludes that "blaming your parents for your life's difficulties finally leads nowhere" (11).

Ford peppers the novel with specific references to events and figures of 1960 to enliven the setting. These allusions imply that the robbery Dell's parents commit and the subsequent murders are in dialogue with the various cultural and social rebellions and revolutions increasingly erupting throughout the decade of the 1960s. His father likes Kennedy and dislikes Eisenhower partially because of his "traitorous silence about Macarthur;" Bev also thinks Nixon is a hypocrite since he has championed war despite being a Quaker, and is also distrustful of the UN "which he thought was too expensive and allowed Commies like Castro (whom he called a 'two-bit actor') to have a voice in

the world” (12). These references add to the novel’s tapestry-like realism while fleshing out Bev and tracking Dell’s bewildering path to maturity. He anticipates entering Great Falls High School in the fall, and his decision to join the chess club and study Latin contribute to his more secure footing as he and Berner grow apart. The past times that he undertakes, such as playing chess, studying the encyclopedia, and taking up beekeeping introduce these important symbols in the novel that Ford will develop. Berner’s meanness to him reflects the relationship of their mother and father, and highlights how even a biological attachment that should promote sameness rather than difference is fraught given cultural variables. In other words, Ford not only blurs the traditional nature vs. nurture conflict, but also seems to privilege a kind of environmental determinism in which the material circumstances of these characters’ lives shape their destiny.

In retrospect, Dell sees how his father’s decision to leave the Air Force, sell new cars, then sell used cars, then take up selling rural real estate signaled the tipping point leading up to his parents’ crimes. His father’s changing of jobs also introduces the theme or motif of the American Dream, as he has consciously or unconsciously subscribed to the belief that hard work inevitably pays off in the form of a well-paying job and a house in the suburbs. Dell also speculates as to why his parents stayed together rather than doing what other married couples do and go their separate ways so that “each of them would’ve had a chance at a good life out in the wide world” (18), and “Fate would’ve dealt them improved hands” (19).

Discussion Question 1

What is significant about the relationship between Dell's parents?

Discussion Question 2

What does Dell think about Great Falls?

Discussion Question 3

What do the novels Berner reads represent?

Vocabulary

conceded, obliging, conveyed, unsuited, exacting, constricted, bespectacled, vestiges, perplexity, studious, conceivably, reluctantly, alienated, subtler, vanguard, credos, transgressed, ratification, reckless, congregated, reclusiveness, assimilate, stigma, bohemian, demoralized, malleable, characterize, obtainable, distinguish, ambivalence, intimately, broody, excluding, disaffected, frugal, deracinated, buoyancy, preoccupying, tumultuous, foreboding, aspirations, apportion

Part 1, Chapters 4-6

Summary

At the beginning of Chapter 4, Dell's narrative tracks the events in the summer of 1960 leading up to the crimes his parents later commit, and he explains how he has cobbled together the story from his own childish observations, unreliable newspaper accounts, and the chronicle his mother wrote while in prison.

For several years, Bev had been involved in a scheme at the base in which officers worked in conjunction with the Cree Indians, who stole and slaughtered Hereford cows from local ranchers and delivered the quality meat for cash. Eventually higher-ups at the base discovered the swindle and Bev was demoted from captain to first lieutenant, which Dell believes contributed to his father's decision to leave the Air Force with an honorable discharge. Bev then decided to resurrect the scheme on his own, only this time supplying the dining cars of the Great Northern Railroad with the beef. Dell says he learned of his mother's knowledge of and opposition to his father's plan years later after reading her chronicle (which she titled "A Chronicle of a Crime Committed by a Weak Person") and that she planned on leaving him but for various indiscernible reasons never did. As Dell concludes, "this is not an unheard-of story in the world" (24).

Bev's dealings with the Indians and the railroad seemed to be going smoothly in Chapter 5. His mother, however, had increasingly been talking to her parents in Tacoma, Washington, which was out of the ordinary for her since she had not spoken to them in 15 years. Her Jewish, intellectual, and conservative parents, Vince and Renny Kamper (anglicized versions of Woitek and Renata Kampycznski) had escaped war-torn Europe in 1918, and thus demanded a predictable and stable life for themselves and their daughter. They had of course objected to her marrying what they deemed an unprofessional ne'er-do-well. Dell speculates that his mother might have been contemplating leaving his father but again can come to no conclusion. He meanwhile joined the school's chess club and even though he had no idea how to play the game, it appealed to him because of its inherent logic, orderliness, and sophistication. He tried to interest Berner in playing chess with him, but her dismissal of it as impractical attested to her severe temperament and growing sarcasm. Dell attributed her moodiness to the fact that she was most like their mother, with whom she developed a closeness that Dell did not. Dell imagined that he was close to his father, though he knew he really wasn't. Despite the family's imminent undoing, Dell says that their lives during that summer in 1960 were fairly normal: his father worked steadily at one job or another, his mother attended summer school at a small Catholic college nearby, Berner had a boyfriend, and Dell decided to take up bee-keeping and continued to excel at chess.

In Chapter 6, Bev's scheme began to go badly because his contact at the railroad, whom Dell refers to as "the Spencer Digby Negro," feared losing his job, distrusted the Indians, and delayed paying them upon delivery of the meat in case he got caught red-handed. Bev thus had to function as the middle man so that it appeared as if the Indians

worked for him and Spencer could deny any involvement. This new arrangement, however, put the Indians at greater risk because of their increased visibility, i.e. having to drive to get the money the next day rather than stealing, slaughtering, handling the meat over and getting paid for it in one night. The chapter concludes with a long drive their father took Dell and Berner on. The twins were baffled by the poor living conditions of the Indians who had no electricity and inhabited dilapidated houses. The purpose of the drive was not immediately clear to Dell and Berner, and they never discussed it after they arrived home.

Analysis

The “penny-ante scheme” of selling meat that leads to his father’s dealings with the railroad and ultimately robbery illustrates how a relatively minor behind-the-scenes swindle can lead to major criminal activity because of Bev’s increasing involvement. Dell says that the ruin of his family began as a lack of common sense, somewhat akin to his parents’ obvious refusal or reluctance to separate. “Common sense should’ve dictated that none of this ever take place,” Dell reflects. “But no one had access to common sense” (22). With these plot twists, the novel implies how blindly continuing to go about one’s stubborn way, or not taking the time to think of consequences of one’s actions, can result in personal tragedy that is only too obvious in hindsight. The more interesting question, however, is why do people like Bev, who is rather socially sophisticated, and Neeva, educated and analytical, end up in such a bad situation that could have easily been prevented. This sense of a “revised life” as Dell calls it—in other words if his mother hadn’t met his father she would have ended up teaching college and marrying a college professor—that became no longer possible because she had gotten pregnant after one sexual encounter also demonstrates how people still “dwell in possibility” (as the poet Emily Dickinson conceptualized it) even though that potential has long since passed.

Despite the horrific circumstances that eventuate, Dell explains how they were still somewhat of a normal family; and this sense of a routine domesticity underscores how the mundanities of daily life still occur no matter the personal tragedies that people encounter. “It seems possible, I suppose,” Dell says, “to look back at our small family as being doomed, as waiting to sink below the churning waves, and being destined for corruption and failure. But I cannot truly portray us that way, or the time as a bad or unhappy time, in spite of it being far out of the ordinary” (30-31). Canada is a novel that depicts an American typicality in that the seeming accidents or arbitrariness of life that constitute both fortune and misfortune as well as bliss and despair are somewhat motivated by bad decisions that people like his parents make. Yet these decisions that evince a cause and effect relationship can be construed as both intentional and unintentional. Hindsight may be a harsh taskmaster, but life’s lessons can only sometimes be learned by going out into the world and really screwing up. This contradiction is tidily summed up in the line from the poem “Crazy Jane Talks with the Bishop” by William Butler Yeats that Dell’s mother reads to him at the time: “Nothing can be sole or whole that has not been rent” (32).

Dell also experiences a sense of superiority and stability upon seeing Indian boys during the long ride his father takes him and Berner on. His comprehension of contemporary Native American life is dismissive of teepees, scalpings, and other Wild West characterizations of them, yet he is somewhat abashed at their horrible living conditions—decaying houses barely standing and junky old automobiles strewn about yards. Dell concludes “these Indian boys…would never amount to anything,” yet he tinges his condemnation of them with sympathetic identification: “Where were their parents, I wondered” (38). Although Dell has parents and the Indian boys may or may not, they both figure as displaced people, and while the Native Americans’ lack of rootedness is the product of powerful historical and cultural factors, Dell on some level realizes he inhabits a similar ambiguous place in Montana as well. Berner asks her father about the Indians “Why would they live here?” to which her father responds “I think you could ask the same questions about the Parsons family…what are we doing in Montana?” This feeling of groundlessness that haunts Dell, and that will be exacerbated by his parents’ crime, causes him at this point to perceive the unreasonableness of his father’s meat-selling scheme that becomes his family’s downfall, “the explanation of which is that human beings are involved” (34). His thoughts about the Indian boys, his father’s involvement in what will grow into criminal activity, and his own place in the world lay the groundwork for the theme or motif of the novel as a coming-of-age story that tracks Dell’s maturity from adolescence into adulthood.

Discussion Question 1

What does Bev's involvement in the "penny-ante" scheme imply about his character?

Discussion Question 2

What are Neeva's parents like and why is this question important?

Discussion Question 3

Why does Bev take Dell and Berner on the long drive to see how the Indians live?

Vocabulary

swindle, supplement, connivance, ennui, insular, pessimistic, mystified, receptive, cryptically, antiquated, arrogant, pretentiously, mused, larcenous, temperament, cataclysmic, disparage, disclosed, precarious, competent, perilous, authoritatively, thwarted, weltering, dilapidated, tethered, observant

Part 1, Chapters 7-9

Summary

Dell sensed something amiss when his father got home one evening in Chapter 7, and the next day his family had a strange visitor by the name of Marvin “Mouse” Williams, a Cree Indian who had trouble walking and was dressed in heavy clothes despite its being August. Bev confronted Williams before he could walk up to the house and said to him “Whoa-whoa-whoa-whoa…You don’t need to be showing up here now. This is my home…This is going to get settled” (47). They had a tense conversation only part of which Dell could discern—he did hear Williams say “This could turn out real bad for everybody” (48)—then the man left. Later Bev told the twins that Williams was a “businessman” who was “honest and demanding” (49), but Dell eventually found out that Williams had threatened to kill his father (or perhaps the whole family) if he did not get paid. Dell explains how at that point his father “began putting together thoughts of needing to do something extraordinary to save us, which turned out to be thoughts about robbing a bank” (50).

In Chapter 8, Dell explains that Digby, his father’s connection at the railroad, refused to pay the $400 owed the Indians because some of the meat was rancid when it arrived and he had disposed of it. But Digby suddenly wanted out of the scheme because it was growing noticeably dangerous, and he was possibly involved in other illegal activities such as prostitution, since “dining car employees and Pullman porters were known to run strings of girls all along the main lines” (52). Digby then vanished to Chicago aboard one of the trains and abandoned Bev to clean up the mess on his own. Bev now owed the Indians $2000 because multiple cows had been recently slaughtered instead of just one, and one of the Indians in the group needed to hide out in Wyoming, since the reservation police suspected he was part of the scheme. Instead of trying to reason with Williams or go to the police, Bev believed that robbing a bank to get him and his family out of the situation to be “a good idea, and that was that” (54).

Chapter 9 begins on the following Monday morning. Dell’s parents had been fighting, his father was unshaved and not dressed up as usual He loaded a gun and some other things into a bag and asked Dell if he would like to go with him. His mother intervened and insisted that Dell was not going anywhere with Bev as she pushed him out of the room and shut the door. His parents started fighting again and Dell was shocked to hear his father swear at his mother, something both his parents never did. His father left without saying goodbye and Dell realized his father’s trip had to do with “something…in our life now that had never been in it before” (59).

Analysis

The precarious corner that Bev has painted himself into—that he and his family might be killed by the Crees for non-payment of beef services rendered—attests to the blind

but good-natured way Dell's father conducts his life. As a military man who has traditionally walked the thin line between the law and crime, Bev is simply trying to improve the financial circumstances of his family. He is a go-getter but often an unrealistic one; and the fact that he has reached the extreme decision of robbing a bank inverts his tendency to deny the ugly realities of life that he stumbles into. Digby's sudden abandonment of the profitable scheme also demonstrates that Bev's dishonest dealings must be conducted with those of a similar stripe—it is not as if he is selling clothes and toys to nuns running an orphanage. Bev thus possesses a kind of sophisticated naïvete in that he can play a dirty game, but he is also not prescient enough to see when he is going to get screwed. Dell describes his father as "being accustomed to getting along well with people, amusing them, being admired for his looks, his nice manners" and "his southern accent" (53). Bev is charming and puts people at ease, which makes him a good salesman, but he also possesses a blind spot about cause and effect that makes him kind of dumb. His reliance on good looks and Southern affability has prevented him from developing an analytical rigor—the trait of successful criminals since they always need to be ten steps ahead—that could have helped him avoid this situation or, as Dell would say, maybe it would not have.

Dell's mother's participation in her husband's crime strikes readers as being out-of-character for her, since Neeva has long held to standards of education and gentility even in the hardscrabble places she has lived. Still, her complicity in Bev's crimes also reveals a much more complicated and brooding woman, whose own sense of personal failure has not been able to transcend the supposed social and financial awards of the middle-class life she has long yearned for and tried to create for herself and instill in her children. The chronicle that Neeva writes in prison and that later falls into Dell's hands indicate that "while all the ways she knew herself to be (when she looked in the mirror and saw the unusual person she was) were accurate and true, she was also weak" (55). Her sense of self-superiority obviously has been a ruse she has played on herself, and her dreams of teaching college, writing poetry, and eventually being a published author have all been attempts at overcompensation in an effort to delude not only others but also mainly herself. On the other hand, human weakness in and of itself hardly bespeaks criminality but, like her husband, she somehow reached an irrational decision that can never be undone. The crime, according to Neeva as she confesses in her chronicle that functions as a symbol of the weakness that prevented her from leaving Bev, and "these facts now confirmed to her that she was just like anybody else, which led her inexorably (by her demented logic) to robbing a bank. …To her, the two words—criminal and weak—may have meant the same thing" (55).

Discussion Question 1

What would cause someone like Bev, at times reckless but mostly rational, to rob a bank? In other words, what would drive seemingly "normal" people to commit such a crime?

Discussion Question 2

What theme(s) is/are introduced in this section (Part 1, Chapters 7-9)?

Discussion Question 3

Describe Dell's mother. Is she a strong individual? Does she see herself as strong? Why or why not?

Vocabulary

accomplices, optimistic, eroded, polygamists, agnostic, cumbersome, stark, muffled, tautness, predicament, precautions, incurred, valiant, reflective, mirthful, demented, gaunt, confined, provincial

Part 1, Chapters 10-12

Summary

Dell's father went on a "business trip" for two days at the beginning of Chapter 10 in order to scope out banks to rob. His plan was to drive out to eastern Montana and western North Dakota, find a bank he deemed suitable, then return with Dell a few days later to rob it. Bev wanted to take Dell because he considered him a "persuasive accomplice" rather than his too "foreign" and "unfriendly" wife to ensure that "robbing a bank" could be a "congenial" experience (61). He figured that if he stole less than $10,000 the bank would be reimbursed by the federal government, the depositors would not lose their money, and he would have thus committed "a crime without any victims" (61). After Bev left on his road trip, Neeva made the twins help her clean the house from top to bottom (something Dell says she never cared about before because they had always rented), so that if they had to move out of Great Falls after the crime she would get her security deposit back. Neeva also phoned her parents in Tacoma to ask them if Dell and Berner could stay with them, and they agreed to let Berner but not Dell because "a boy was too much" (65). Berner was planning on running away with her boyfriend Rudy and didn't want to live with her grandparents anyway, while Dell hoped everything went well so that he could stay in Great Falls to begin high school, play chess and take up beekeeping. After they cleaned the house, Neeva attained this mysterious state of tranquility, grew much more good-natured, joked around with her children, and watched their TV shows with them. Dell ascribes this inexplicable change in her behavior to the freedom "from all the forces that oppressed her" and that finally fulfilled her "great, untapped, years-suppressed longing for change" (68).

In Chapter 11, Bev returned home two days later on Wednesday night in a very good mood. He strode around the house looking into one room after another seemingly noticing how clean it was. He was relaxed, talked unguardedly (Dell heard the return of his father's Southern accent which indicated his relaxation), and described new global developments he had heard on Canadian radio during his trip, such as urban growth in South America, weather-predicting satellites, and organ transplants. The family sat on the front porch and enjoyed each other's company while Bev and Neeva drank beer and Berner told her father about strange cars slowing down in front of their house and phone calls with no one on the other end of the line. Her father dismissed her concerns and reassured Dell that he would attend the local high school and that their fortunes would soon improve. Dell recognized the irony that his parents "should have frustration, anxiety and worry pass away like clouds dispersing after a storm" (75), and noticed a new look in his father's eyes that reminds him of "homeless men…lined up outside the doors of missions, waiting to get in out of a long winter," and in whose eyes Dell had seen "the remnants of who they almost succeeded in being but failed to be before becoming themselves" (76).

The very short Chapter 12 describes how Dell confronted his parents in the kitchen and told them he was going with them to rob the bank.

Analysis

Bev's confident decision to rob a bank and Neeva's sudden sense of tranquility both embody a contentment or satisfaction with life even though the actions they soon take will result in domestic disaster. In other words, the bourgeois plan of success that Neeva's parents raised her with—that members of the middle-class go to college, get to do what they have always planned to do "once they grow up," and live lives of financial prosperity and social prestige—more often than not remains unfulfilled for most people. The novel's theme or motif of the proverbial American Dream remains now as then the carrot dangling in front of professional aspirants, but this dream in the 1960s, the setting of the novel, must have seemed even more crucial to attain given the blueprint supplied by 1950s popular culture such as Leave It to Beaver and Ozzie and Harriet. These TV shows Bev and Neeva most likely grew up with, and this speculation isn't so far-fetched given the novel's almost obsession-like mania for the cultural details from the 1960s that abound throughout it. If Bev cannot be the masculine provider that his Southern heritage and military background groomed him to be, then rob a bank. That is one way of getting rich quickly. If Neeva cannot teach college, then rob a bank and to hell with it all. Of course, the reasons are much more complex, but teasing them out may not supply any further explanation as to why they decide to rob a bank. As Dell concludes, these "reasons…in the light of a later day don't make any sense at all and have to be invented" (69).

Ironically, Bev's and Neeva's decision to commit a crime supplies them with a counter-productive project or plan that helps them to become what they were always supposed to be—bank robbers. If American culture consists of doctors and lawyers, laborers and servers then bank robbers and drug addicts also constitute its varied tapestry. Dell notices this social paradox especially in his father's changed features once he returns home from his bank-scouting expedition, and this sudden alteration mirrors his mother's curious and newfound tranquility. Before Bev left he looked "fleshy and exhausted," with "loose and indistinct and washed out" features (75). Upon his return however, "his features looked dark and chiseled, and his now "gleam[ing]" eyes looked "as if they saw a world he hadn't seen before" (75). Dell's comparison of his father to the homeless men who also have worn this look is "a theory of destiny and character" he doesn't "like or want to believe in" (76). Dell's Social Darwinist theory that employs environmental determinism to account for character rather than individual choice to be a saint or a sinner, a success or a failure, or a CEO or bank robber, provides evidence of itself in these down-and-out men who have fallen socially a long way because "plenty of them were handsome, but ruined" (76). His father thus figures as one in a long line of these desperate disenfranchised, because Dell can never "see such a ruined man without saying silently to myself: There's my father. My father is that man. I used to know him" (76).

Discussion Question 1

Why does Dell's mother suddenly experience a state of tranquility?

Discussion Question 2

Why do Dell's grandparents not want him to stay with them? What does this say about the time period this story takes place in?

Discussion Question 3

What does Dell's comparison of his father with the homeless men mean?

Vocabulary

criteria, susceptible, calamity, voided, provoked, ebullient, inconspicuous, engulfing, dispatched, femme fatale, dissolution, oppressed, evaporate, prospecting, fretting, indistinct, visibility, phenomenon, remnants

Part 1, Chapters 13-15

Summary

Dell's declaration that he was going to rob the bank with his parents turned out to be a dream as he woke up on Thursday morning in Chapter 13. His parents told him they would be gone for a few days, and that Berner and he needed to watch the house and not answer the phone. Dell asked his father if he was going to bring his gun, which alarmed his mother. She then said that, when all was over, she would take him and Berner someplace nice. He answered that he wanted to go to Moscow because of its associations with famous chess players, but his mother said she had been thinking of some place more like Seattle. Dell then describes how, when his father was stationed in Biloxi Mississippi, he and his father would go to an air-conditioned movie theater that ran movies, shorts, cartoons, and old newsreels all day long. One of the newsreels from the 1930s featured the life and death of the bank-robbing duo Bonnie and Clyde. Later that day when Dell and his father exited the theater they saw an old gray four-door Ford from the 1930s perched on a flatbed truck with a sign reading "ACTUAL BONNIE AND CLYDE DEATH CAR—WILL PAY YOU $10,000 IF YOU PROVE IT'S NOT" (82). The gullible and curious theatergoers eagerly paid 50 cents to inspect the car, but based upon Bev's military experience with bullet-riddled objects he concluded that it was a "fakeroo" (83). Bev then asked Dell if he'd ever consider robbing a bank and Dell replied no. His father then said, "I could give it a try. I'd be smarter than these two, though. You don't use your noggin, you end up a piece of Swiss cheese. Your mother'd take this wrong, of course. You don't need to relate it to her" (83). Dell now realizes that, on some level, his father had always wanted to be a bank robber: "Some people want to be bank presidents. Other people want to rob banks" (83).

Chapter 14 is a very short account of the bank robbery, almost not an account at all, since Dell claims the crime was "so ridiculous and inexplicable as to make the reportable facts inadequate as an explanation" (84). Dell then recounts the reasons his parents failed: their car would be immediately recognizable; his father's altered jumpsuit would still be recognized as from a military base; Bev's good looks and Southern accent would be noticed in North Dakota; the fact that he joked to several people at the base that he had always thought about robbing a bank and, now as felons, they stood out because they were unlike everyone else who was not a felon. "For all these reasons," Dell concludes, "discovering who robbed a bank begins not to be difficult at all" (85).

Dell details his father's plan to rob the North Dakota Agricultural Bank in Chapter 15, and after describing it to his wife during their two-day drive of 400 miles from Great Falls to Creekmore, North Dakota she immediately dismissed it as too complicated and with "too many moving parts" (89). Instead of hiding out at an abandoned ranch, stealing a truck, hiding the car, and staying the night, Neeva told Bev to change the plates on their car to North Dakota ones, go in, rob the bank, and then leave. They were eventually caught because of the reasons previously enumerated in Chapter 14, and that they

“simply did not understand life in small prairie towns, where everyone notices everything” (90).

Analysis

Bev and Neeva Parsons’ thwarted ambitions to achieve middle-class success continue to motivate them to commit themselves to this serious crime, but given the prevalence of white-collar crime, the th theme of the American Dream here doesn’t necessarily obligate its adherents to remain law-abiding citizens. Dell’s analysis of his parents’ logic behind the crime indicates that, as his parents become partners in crime (hence, the Bonnie and Clyde allusion which the fake car symbolizes), they experience a rejuvenation that resurrects how Dell imagines they may have felt toward each other when in their twenties—about the same age that Bonnie and Clyde were when killed. Dell describes his “fantasy” as to how his parents got along during the long drive: “In my (you could call it a) fantasy, they didn’t argue, didn’t seethe or argue or loathe. He didn’t try to persuade her to commit robbery. …She didn’t rehearse the reasons a robbery would be necessary” (91).

The mirage of stealing $10,000 that beckons them—an amount much greater than the $2000 he owes the Indians—figures as a windfall to right all of the wrongs that life has dealt them, and the amount of $10,000 echoes again in the “prize money” offered for the Bonnie and Clyde car. In other words, $10,000 has always been a magic number in American literature that functions as a kind of deus ex machina. One need only recall the $10,000 life insurance policy in A Raisin in the Sun by Lorraine Hansberry, or the $10,000 legacy Lily Bart inherits from her wealthy aunt in The House of Mirth by Edith Wharton. In both of these instances, however, the money is tainted, since the Youngers lose a large portion of their cash while Lily Bart receives only $10,000 because she has been disinherited. The Parsons’ attempt to rob the North Dakota Agricultural Bank of more than $2000 is thus fueled by the desire to set themselves up on a new financial foundation, or it represents a last-ditch effort for Bev to make his mark doing more than selling cars or ranches or stealing cows. As Dell speculates about his father’s reasoning, robbing this bank is “something that would put either him and us all on easy street, or blow easy street to smithereens so nothing would ever be the way it had been again. Both or either could be true, given his mercurial, imprudent character” (91).

Now in her fifties, Neeva experiences a sense of newfound freedom with her husband during their trip together; and although educated, thoughtful, and analytical, she also comes “to the remarkably mistaken conclusion that robbing a bank was a risk that would facilitate things she wanted” (92). “Tired of her miscalculated life which had become a reproach” (92), Neeva believes the money they steal will permit her to recreate her life once and for all, but Dell equates this “miscalculation” (92) with the foundational mistake of her adult life when she married Bev because she was pregnant. Dell reasons that these “disastrous choices” of his parents have rendered him “distrustful of normal life” but also “in equal parts desperate for it” (93): “It’s hard to hold the idea of a normal life, and also the end they came to, in my mind at one time. But it’s worth trying, since I repeat: otherwise very little of this story can be understood” (93).

Discussion Question 1

What does Dell's dream mean?

Discussion Question 2

What is the significance of Bonnie and Clyde in this novel?

Discussion Question 3

Describe Dell's parents' bank robbing plan. Is it well thought out? Why or why not?

Vocabulary

prominent, jurisdiction, despised, emerged, queasy, posse, gawking, yokels, yowling, inexplicable, conceivably, deranged, recollected, brandished, mesmerized, affix, prevailed, unsound, frayed, mercurial, imprudent, facilitate, reproach, affinity

Part 1, Chapters 16-18

Summary

Chapter 16 details the robbery of the Agricultural National Bank. While Neeva waited outside in the car (because of her conspicuous, foreign appearance), Bev entered the bank and ordered everyone to lie face down on the ground while he commanded the bank teller to fill his bag with cash. Dell describes "this moment—the moment of proclamation, the gun revealed, the stagy commands of 'don't move or I'll shoot'" as the point at which his father "felt the exhilaration to be finally doing what he'd so long wanted to do" (97). This feeling of euphoria instantly vanished as the bad consequences of his actions became evident. The bank's vice president asked "Where are you from, son?" after detecting Bev's Southern accent, which rendered him more noticeable as opposed to anonymous as he had hoped (98). A customer boldly challenged him by saying "you won't get away with it. …You're not the only one with a gun around here" (98). As a result, Bev experienced "'a great wave of resentment' toward all the people in the bank" (98), since their attempts not to submit blindly to his demands he found deflating. His anger and humiliation prompted him to think about shooting them all but he doesn't. Bev now realized what a horrible mistake he had made, since everyone in the bank had gotten a good look at him, and the fact that the bank had been robbed not so very long ago (he later learned) had jaded them to the point that they were neither overawed by nor afraid of him. He made off with only $2500 and his regret: "It already felt very much like robbing a bank was the wrong thing to have done" (99).

After leaving the bank, Bev hid in the back seat until they drove back to the Montana line in Chapter 17. He disposed of his clothing and the North Dakota license plates, and they returned to the motel they had stayed at along the way to gather their belongings. Neeva concluded as they drove back home that "she'd soon be looking at a new life that didn't include our father or Great Falls, Montana" (100).

In retrospect, Dell thinks about three things connected to the aftermath of his parents' bank robbery in Chapter 18. First, his parents, who had always been unlike each other, now "seemed less different from each other" and more like "two people who'd once gotten married because they liked each other" (103). Second, after realizing years later that his father wanted him to be his accomplice rather than his mother, he wonders how his father would have asked him to rob a bank with him: "Would he have explained to me that he intended to hold up a bank and that he wanted me to help him? What words would he have chosen to bring this up to a fifteen-year old?" (103). Third, Dell asks himself "what would've happened if we'd been caught together—captured and put in jail; or set upon by police like Bonnie and Clyde, shot to death and laid out for pictures?" (104). Dell ends by speculating what would become of his parents if they had never been caught.

Analysis

Bev's self-justification about robbing a bank since he had served in the military so long but had subsequently experienced a bunch of bad breaks—"the Indians, the jobs, the Air Force, my mother," according to Dell (97)—permits him to craft himself into a lone wolf figure who really isn't hurting anyone at all, since the federal government will reimburse everyone. His resentment at the cool heads that prevail in the bank, since they have just gone through another robbery and feel disgusted by yet another selfish attempt, prompts him to consider shooting them "one by one, removing any chance he'd be caught, and serving them right for being unluckier than he was" (98). Bev never goes through with this sociopathic-like impulse to destroy others in an attempt to assuage his own feelings of worthlessness and failure, since he still possesses quite a bit of humanity. (His desire to put everyone at ease, not wear a mask to cover his "handsome" face, and his charming ways all evince this.) In other words, he is a nice guy caught in a bad situation. Bev's final confused and panicky moments as he considers going into the vault to steal even more money (which he decides against) also reinforce his sense of notorious fame and masculine presence among his victims whom he wishes had cowered more: "Everyone would see him in their mind's eye for the rest of their lives when they told about being in the bank the day it was robbed. He knew all this. He might even have liked it. He could smell sweat on himself—sweat they could smell, too" (99).

Although Neeva plans a life for herself as they drive back to Montana, the bank robbery has somehow functioned as a bonding experience for Dell's mother and father. His comments that they were more like each other (all else being relative since they had always been so unlike each other) alludes to the novel's ongoing thematic exploration of the implicit destiny of the middle-class American dream. Little boys and girls (even the marginalized) dream of becoming the President of the United States or a billionaire tech company founder, not a bank robber or serial killer; but with all of the odds against Bev and Neeva—a failed military officer and a frustrated college professor—the criminal path not only becomes optional but also naturalized in their perceptions. Stealing that money becomes a way to the good life, or at least a better life.

Dell's questions as to what his parents would have made of themselves had they never been caught result in his conclusion that his mother would have done just as she had planned the day of the robbery: left her husband, taken the twins, and moved somewhere else to begin life anew. As for his father, Dell is not so sure: "If the robbery had worked out, his nature—as I said—was to think it would always work out and could probably be improved upon. At least one more time" (104). Neeva and Bev may feel themselves caught in frustrating circumstances, but Dell's speculation that she would have tried to start again demonstrates an adaptability and decisiveness. Her choice would indeed be a choice. Bev would have continued just as he always had been as a kind of biological constant unable to change even though he thinks he can: "He…always believed…that he didn't seem like the sort of man to rob a bank. This was, of course, his greatest misunderstanding" (104).

Discussion Question 1

Why does Neeva stay in the car when Bev robs the bank?

Discussion Question 2

What is Bev's experience of robbing the bank like? What mistakes does he make?

Discussion Question 3

Why is it important to Dell once he realizes years later that his father wanted him to be his accomplice?

Vocabulary

formulated, vacant, exhilaration, compensation, dapper, temptingly, shucked, continuum, adamant, adversary, jeopardized, imbued

Part 1, Chapters 19-21

Summary

Dell's parents arrived home about seven in the evening on Friday in Chapter 19. Bev told the twins as they ate dinner that the business trip had been a success, since he has decided not to invest in the "oil wells" he went to look at. They would stay in Great Falls and life would recommence as normally as possible. He would throw himself into selling ranches, Berner and Dell would start high school in two weeks, and Bev and Neeva planned to buy the house from their landlord and fix it up. "All of it was a lie, of course," Dell says (107). He nonetheless finds it touching that his parents tried to remain "charmed by one last taste of the life they'd tossed away."

Chapter 20 begins on the following Saturday morning. Bev was not home, and Neeva was distracted. Dell went shopping with her and explained all of his future plans to her, which she seemed not to hear. When they came back home, Neeva dressed in the suit she usually wore when teaching school and was picked up by Mildred Remlinger, the nurse at the school where she taught, who was having personal problems that she needed to discuss with another woman. After she left, Dell and Berner walked down to the river and his sister told him how she had been sneaking out at night and that she and Rudy had been kissing. She showed him the hickey Rudy gave her and Dell professed to complete ignorance about sex. Dell longed to be away from Great Falls and imagined himself hopping onto the train and going away to college, "everything in my life after that being on its way" (113).

As Berner and Dell walked back from the river in Chapter 21, she told Dell that she was thinking about running away with Rudy to San Francisco where his mother lived. She told Dell not to tell their parents and called him names. They entered the house where his father was polishing his cowboy boots. He told Dell to sit down while Berner went to take a bath, and told him a story about how when he was a boy in Alabama, a doctor down the street had molested a friend of his named Buddy Inkster. His mother's strange reaction, "Buddy, you tell that ole man to cut that stuff out!" (117), Bev contrasted with the consequences the doctor would be facing were he to molest boys today, but explained to Dell that Mrs. Inkster's response implied that her son "should learn to live with things and go about his business" (118). The moral of Bev's story, he told Dell, was that "bad things can happen to you." After their conversation, Mildred Remlinger dropped off Dell's mother, and his father concluded how "she's going to have everything all figured out" (119).

Analysis

The lie about oil wells that Dell's father offers them as the explanation as to why they will remain in Great Falls is an attempt to make the best of an inevitable and impending doom. They occupy a purgatory-like space between "where everything…looked the

same” and “calamitous consequence to be dealt with” (107). Although “events” may no longer be “the same as what you make up,” introduces the theme or motif of the art of story-telling that pervades the novel. As a work of fiction by a “real” author, Dell’s narration of his family’s life, as well as the symbol of beekeeping, are acts of creation, even procreation, since beekeeping is a practice that sustains potentially dangerous beings most people want to avoid. Bev’s and Neeva’s own plot will blow up in their faces, but the division between storytelling and lying remains an ambiguous one; and sometimes the Coleridgean suspension of disbelief that requires readers to accept a plot that isn’t necessarily true, does not mean it is completely a lie either. As his parents “still make themselves think, act, talk in the old ways,” Dell finds them “forgivable for that, even likeable” (107) as their undoing approaches.

The fictional aspect of their disbelief is also implicit in the theatricality of any “scene of the crime,” and Bev converts his story about Buddy Inkster’s molestation into a kind of morality play to teach Dell a lesson—a lesson that, one might add, Bev tells as much as for himself as for Dell. Despite Mrs. Inkster’s weird response to what her son tells her, Buddy had already reached a point where he stopped the doctor from continuing the abuse, and this minor episode extends the theme of (mostly distorted) human sexuality in the novel. The point that confronting misfortune and enduring its consequences is lost on Bev in the retelling of his story, since Buddy (or Dell for that matter in other circumstances) was the victim, not the perpetrator. Bev was the perpetrator in the bank, yet he became oddly disappointed when his victims refused to act like victims. Bev’s penchant for causing problems and not responding to them adequately or understanding and accepting the consequences is underscored as Neeva returns home: “She’s going to have everything all worked out,” he says. “You wait and see. She’s a smart cookie. Smarter than I am by a long way” (119).

Discussion Question 1

What does Bev's lie about the oil wells signify?

Discussion Question 2

What is Dell's response to Berner's hickey? What does this tell us about Dell?

Discussion Question 3

Why does Dell's father tell him the story of Buddy Inkster?

Vocabulary

distracted, amplified, symmetry, finicky, embroidering, digressed, sneered, glum, acrid, appraised, hierarchy, conspirator

Part 1, Chapters 22-24

Summary

The Parsons tried to spend a normal Saturday in Chapter 22, despite a police car driving by the house repeatedly. Neeva washed clothes while Bev assembled a puzzle of Hudson River School artist Frederic Church's rendering of Niagra Falls. Berner discovered her mother's partially packed suitcase and asked if they were all going on a trip. Dell's father suggested they should go to the State Fair since admission was half-price on the last day. Berner didn't want to go until her father told her a story about the last time he saw his Uncle Cleo, whom he didn't accompany on a trip down to Birmingham, and he wished he had. Berner felt as if he was blackmailing her but decided to go because, in the end, "she couldn't resist him when he focused in on her," Dell says, "only our mother could. We loved both of them for what it mattered. This shouldn't get lost in the telling. We always loved them" (124).

In Chapter 23 Dell, his sister and their father approached the crowded entrance to the fairgrounds. Dell noticed all of the different rides, the many Indians crowding the gates and, in his anticipation to get out of the car found the packet of stolen money. His reaction of "oh" was loud enough to alert his father, who asked anxiously if there were cops behind them while Berner turned around, saw the money, and then turned back around. Dell explained his strange behavior to his father by telling him a bee had stung him, then he stuffed the packet of money down the front of his jeans. In his agitated state, Bev turned the car around and drove back home.

Dell was disappointed and angry at the beginning of Chapter 24 because he wouldn't be able to see the beekeeping exhibit, so his father drove them out to the base to watch the jets take off instead while a black Ford with two men inside continued to pursue them. Berner asked why their mother's suitcase was packed and her father explained that she and they were going away for a while. Bev tried to outrun the Ford while demanding the twins remember his lesson about "making sense": "It means you accept things. If you understand, then you accept. If you accept, then you understand," he explained (131). Dell realized his father was implying that he put the money back and say nothing about it. Berner started crying (something she rarely did any more) because of her father's perceived disagreeableness to her. Dell pretended to tie his shoe, returned the money to behind the back seat, and sat up to see his father "staring a hole through me again" (133). They returned home and as Bev parked the car the black Ford drove slowly by as the men looked at them.

Analysis

Both the Russian novel Crime and Punishment by Fyodor Dostoevsky and the American short story "The Tell-Tale Heart" by Edgar Allan Poe present readers with villains who are so guilt-ridden that they must confess even though they have committed perfect

crimes. Bev and Neeva Parsons have committed a less-than-perfect crime, and even if they had never been caught, Dell explains that “guilt has less to do with it than you might think”: “Rather, the intolerable problem is of everything suddenly being so confused. …What a person becomes in such a situation is paralyzed—caught in one long, sustained, intolerable present. …Who wouldn’t admit everything just to gain release from the terrible present?” (120). This no-man’s-land-like space that Bev and Neeva continue to inhabit both fuels their plans to find a way out, make things better, and (pretend) to have a normal life once again. Given the narrative arc of the novel, however, it is clear from the beginning that his parents will be caught. Thus Canada continues its exploration not so much of the consequences of committing a foolhardy crime, or even a kind of forensics analysis of the people who might do so, but rather how criminals go about their day-to-day business despite the swirling, threatening, confusing context of their lives. Both Dostoeysky’s Raskolnikov and Poe’s unnamed narrator confess after throes of guilt, and while Dell does not allude to these works specifically the lesson still does obtain. “Who wouldn’t want to stop that—if he could?” Dell continues. “Make the present give way to almost no future at all. …I would. Only a saint wouldn’t” (120).

Whether Bev is a saint or no remains unclear, and perhaps that is not even the question. After the uncomfortable, failed, and anxiety-ridden attempt to go to the fair peppered with the pursuing black Ford, Berner’s hurt and dissatisfaction, and Dell’s discovery of the money, they arrive home and Bev seems to recommence with his usual Southern charm. Dell, in effect, highlights the sincere but tainted struggle of his parents to continue to stumble through their lives, trying to make it normal again either for themselves or their children. The sense of temporariness and uncertainly that Dell indicates is the worst of all—a life of endless ambiguity, lack of clarity, or a kind of cellophane world looked at through the bottom of a glass—perhaps continues to endear his father to him: “He twisted around to me” and “just smiled his big white-tooth smile, as if a battle had been lost” (135). His admiration and love for his father permits Dell in hindsight to realize what his father had endured, what he went through (however illogical superficially speaking) in order to provide for his family and live the good life. “This is where we live,” his father concludes. “There’s nothing we can do about it. Home sweet home. At least for now” (135). There is no place like a dream home in the American suburbs that Bev can give to his family, and over the rainbow only nightmares will come true for the Parsons.

Discussion Question 1

What does Bev's story about his Uncle Cleo mean?

Discussion Question 2

Why does Dell tell his father a bee stung him?

Discussion Question 3

What do the men in the black Ford want?

Vocabulary

intolerable, impenetrable, sustained, aggressive, collaborate, hauteur, speculated, conjecture, sullen, astounded, glared, haughty, spewing, smirked, substantial, defying, aggrieved, stricken, contemptible

Part 1, Chapters 25-27

Summary

Dell lay on his bed as it started to rain in Chapter 25. His father had fallen asleep while Berner was in her room and his mother worked in the kitchen. He thought about the fair ending, and took down volume B of the encyclopedia and read about the orderly world of the beehive. He recalled the time when he was sick with scarlet fever as his parents stood over him. He then falls asleep.

Dell woke up in Chapter 26 and ate a sandwich his mother had made him. She asked him to come into her bedroom where he saw her packing her suitcase. She told him that she was taking him and Berner to Seattle the next day and then eventually to Canada. Dell was upset because he wanted to stay in Great Falls to attend high school, but she told him to pack only his toothbrush. He asked if he could bring his chessmen and she agreed.

In Chapter 27 Dell woke up to use the bathroom and found his father completing the puzzle of Niagra Falls. His father told him that his mother had a plan and Dell asked if he was going with them. His father played a trick with the puzzle piece by pretending to eat it, and as Dell kept waiting for the piece to appear, his father hugged him and told him that they would work on getting Dell in physical shape upon his return. Dell kept waiting for the missing puzzle piece but his father indicated that he really ate it this time. “It’s not a trick every time,” he said. “That’s the magician’s secret” (146).

Analysis

These impressionistic chapters function as vignettes that establish the mood of the house and family in the calm during the (literal) storm of heavy summer rainfall. Dell tries to find stability amid the chaos of his life, and his penchant for turning to the encyclopedia account of beekeeping again symbolizes domestic perfection. “Everything in the hive was an ideal, orderly world where the queen was honored and sacrificed for. If this didn’t happen, everything fell into confusion” (137). This reference to a noble sacrifice appeals to Dell because it implies a cause, a purpose, and a place in the world —something humans lack, since bees “responded perfectly to their environment and other bees” (137). The beehive may be environmentally determined, but it’s a utopia rather than the naturalistic world of an Emile Zola novel in which biology equals destiny. After his mother informs him that they’re going to Seattle to see her parents and then possibly Canada, his confusion exacerbates and he tries to hide the hot tears stinging his eyes. Dell’s hopes of a having a stable and normal home life, once again disrupted, impel him to keep himself grounded, since no one in his family has been able to provide him with that security so far in his life. “Things were happening around me,” he says. “My part was to find a way to be normal. Children know normal better than anyone” (142).

The usual trick that his father plays on him with pretending to swallow the puzzle piece also now defies the logic that Dell is used to. Dell waits for the piece to reappear—as it always has before—but this time his father has really eaten it, or at least claims to have done so. Although a very minor point, the beauty of a repeated magic trick is that although the mechanism by which it occurs may remain inexplicable, the outcome is already known and anticipated. Once again, Dell's father fails to deliver for his son even in this most mediocre episode. Feeling lost and confused, Dell hugs his father and "goes to sleep in my cold bed" (147).

Discussion Question 1

What does the world of the beehive represent to Dell?

Discussion Question 2

What is the connection between the puzzle Bev assembles and Neeva's parents?

Discussion Question 3

Why does Bev swallow the puzzle piece?

Vocabulary

spattering, dismantling, strenuous, restorative, scoured, idled, constricted, crucial, exaggeratedly

Part 1, Chapters 28-30

Summary

Dell, Berner and their mother prepared for the train ride to Seattle in Chapter 28. That previous night, Dell dreamed (or thought he dreamed) about a bat trapped against his window that he helped free, as well as a car pulling up in front the house with two men in it. When he woke up, his mother brought in a pillowcase and told him to pack the essentials while his father walked around the house trying to keep everyone in a good mood. The doorbell rang and Bev went to answer it. As his mother asked who it was "she dropped a dish onto the floor then. It broke to bits just as my father was pulling the door back to whatever news was waiting for us" (149).

In Chapter 29 two policemen arrived and asked Bev if he had been to North Dakota recently, if that was his Chevy in back, etc. When one of the officers started interrogating Berner, their mother yelled at him and told him not to talk to her. Eventually one of the policeman took Bev outside to talk while the rest of the family and the other officer stayed in the living room.

As the older policeman escorted Bev outside to speak with him in Chapter 30, the younger one, Bishop, remained in the living room and asked Neeva some questions she deemed impertinent and snapped at him. The older policeman entered and Dell saw his father outside shaking his head and shouting something toward the door while the two officers handcuffed Neeva. Bev remained outside telling the crowd that had gathered from the Lutheran church that "the fair's left town" (160) as the policemen led Neeva away. Both Dell and Berner were visibly upset as their father was forced into the police car and more gawkers gathered to watch. "It was a spectacle," Dell says, "the worst possible thing that could happen, happening in the worst possible way" (160). The cop car drove away and Dell saw his mother speaking angrily at his father.

Analysis

These chapters perpetuate the dream-like space that Dell inhabits, since his dream world is sometimes part of reality and sometimes not. But the phantasmagoria of his life when awake grows even more horrific. The shifting sands upon which his father has built the family's domestic foundation continue to erode. Dell is often confused and fearful at his father's insistence to continue his jokey ways as serious threats have now literally crossed the threshold in the form of the two officers who have come to arrest his parents. His mother's ordeal strikes him as particularly painful. While trying to maintain her composure and dignity, her contemptuous responses to the younger policeman do not assuage the situation, and her repetition that "I have two children" is finally met with the cops' response that "they belong to the State of Montana today" (159). As she is handcuffed and taken away, she experiences great difficulty while his father shouts insensibly outside and does not help matters. "It is not simple to describe what I saw,"

Dell says, “My mother’s feet didn’t move willingly, but she didn’t struggle or say anything other than to say she had two children. Her eyes became fixed in front of her—not on me—as if what she was doing was difficult to perform” (158). Although the Parsons have robbed a bank, Neeva’s helpless awkwardness and his father’s frustrated yelling elicit a piteous response.

The peanut-crunching-like crowd of Lutheran churchgoers who stare at the spectacle punctuate Dell’s own helplessness as he watches his parents being driven away and notices his mother characteristically yelling at his father. He can do nothing but relent to these adult forces beyond his control: “I stood on the front porch and let it all take place. Let it take place. Let my parents be driven off as if it was all right with me. …Then I went back inside rather than stand and watch and be a spectacle to our neighbors…. I couldn’t really think what else to do. I couldn’t just stand there. Then that part of this was at an end” (160).

Discussion Question 1

Why does Neeva begin preparing to take Dell and Berner to Seattle?

Discussion Question 2

How does Neeva react to the presence of the police officers? Why?

Discussion Question 3

How does Dell feel about his mother's being handcuffed? How does he react to this scene? What does this say about him?

Vocabulary

testy, tallied, extraction, distinct, daintily, trussed, spectacle

Part 1, Chapters 31-33

Summary

Dell decided to retrieve the stolen bank money from behind the seat in his father's Bel Air in Chapter 31. He knew the cops would be looking for it, so he tore off the band wrapped around the cash that identified its having come from the Agricultural National Bank, flushed it down the toilet, and hid the money in two even piles beneath the silverware tray in the kitchen drawer. He then fell asleep for a long time.

Dell woke up to find Berner talking on the phone with Rudy in Chapter 32. He discovered that his father's car had been towed away but that the money was still hidden in the kitchen drawer. Berner said she was going to marry Rudy and expressed her contempt for their parents. Both cried or started to cry, but a feeling of control came over Dell, who decided "I would be myself no matter what happens," with or without his sister, whose foolish behavior and idiotic plans "made everything about me and everything I thought feel flimsy" (166).

Dell and Berner counted and divided the stolen money (totaling $500) at the beginning of Chapter 33 and looked around their parents' room for more. They tried on their parents' clothing when they heard a knock on the door and discovered it was Rudy, and even though "he and I are in love," Berner said, she also confessed how "I forgot about him" (171). Rudy was drunk as he smoked and strutted around the house, shared his whiskey with Berner and Dell and started dancing to a Glen Miller record of their father's Berner had put on. Rudy told Dell to dance with him, Berner grew jealous, and as Rudy let go of Dell he said "I've given Dell-boy his big thrill now" (174). Berner cooked Rudy a steak which was burned on the outside and still frozen on the inside. After Rudy ate, his cagey behavior continued as he looked around the room as if to steal something of value to pawn. He told the twins that he had "a plan to get some money that night," which Dell knew meant stealing (175), and he left. They both realized they would never see him again and Dell felt fine with that: "I expected this would be the last I'd see of Rudy Patterson, and I was glad. He hadn't helped anything. And although there was no way I could know it, that is what turned out to be true" (181).

Analysis

Despite the titillating aspects of the novel, Canada participates in the classic coming-of-age genre, or Bildungsroman, established by James Joyce in his modernist novel A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man (1916), and the novel develops this theme or motif in these chapters. The constant uprootedness of Dell's life and the traumatic experiences he endures cause him to reflect that it's a wonder that he hasn't gone crazy: "You'd think that to watch your parents be handcuffed, called bank robbers to their faces and driven away to jail, and for you to be left behind might make you lose your mind. …And for someone that might be true. But you don't know how you'll act in

such a situation until it happens" (161). In other words, Dell is simply growing up, although, again, his circumstances evade the comfort and mollycoddling of the safe, suburban, bourgeois life that all of the characters in the novel aspire to consciously or unconsciously. Dell and his sister aren't little kids either, and they manage to look after themselves once the police officers take their parents away to jail.

Another element that reflects Dell's maturity, and emerging sexuality, is the sudden appearance of Rudy, and the theme of heteronormativity in the novel, meaning that everyone assumes everyone else is naturally heterosexual, reinforces the book's examination of human sexuality. Berner and Rudy plan to run away to Salt Lake City or San Francisco to get married but their plans, like everything in Rudy's life, are both ephemeral and unrealistic. Still, his presence has a strange, almost magical-like effect on Dell. When Rudy enters the house, Dell confesses to feeling as if "time stopped and our lives stopped with it," even though he knows that Rudy is "not the sort of boy you'd expect to have a good effect" (171). Dell notices how sexually developed Rudy is even though he is only a year or two older. "He seemed older and bigger than the last time I saw him," Dell says, "He…had wild, curly red hair and long, red-freckled arms and big hands with hair already on the backs…. He had veins in his biceps below his t-shirt sleeves…. He wore dirty tight black dungarees with a wide belt and a brass buckle… and thick black ankle boots" (171). Although not a specimen of male beauty, Rudy exudes a masculinity that Dell admires and even though he realizes Rudy is the consummate bad boy he momentarily considers running off with both him and Berner, as if he can envision himself as part of the potential couple.

The narrative also highlights Dell's sexual ambiguity, which Rudy exploits in a mild way. As Rudy is dancing to Glenn Miller by himself, he commands Dell "You have to dance with me," which Dell confesses to enjoying: "He danced over, put his arms around me and pulled me up…his scuffed hands now and then clutching my shoulder and the middle of my back" (174). Berner tells Rudy to "quit dancing with your boyfriend" to which Rudy then responds "I've given Dell-boy his big thrill now" (174). Whether Dell is gay or not really seems not the point, but Rudy's behavior reveals his true character. He represents the kind of slimy straight guy who will morph into anything or anyone necessary in order to make a buck or con the trustful and unsuspecting stranger. Dell is smart enough to perceive this, but Rudy is still so sly that he intimates some sexual confusion or curiosity on Dell's part, and his manipulation of Dell (and probably Berner too) helps him to assert the power in their collective relationship.

Discussion Question 1

What does Dell do with the money from the bank? Why might he do this? What does this suggest about his character?

Discussion Question 2

Why does Rudy come over? What is his role in the novel?

Discussion Question 3

How does Dell feel about dancing with Rudy? What does this suggest?

Vocabulary

surveyed, regulate, inhalations, unfazed, disheveled, flimsy, eventuality, middlebrow, exploitation, erratic, deceitful

Part 1, Chapters 34-36

Summary

In Chapter 34 Berner climbed into Dell's bed with him. She was naked, and Dell's narration implies that they had engaged in some physical intimacy before. Berner confessed to having "done it" earlier with Rudy in the car and that she had wanted to do it again with him that night. Dell and Berner then engaged in some sexual activity which remained undisclosed, although Dell claimed that he had willingly participated. "And that's enough to tell," Dell said. "It doesn't bear repeating. It meant little, what we did, except to us, and only for the time" (184).

Chapter 35 begins on Monday morning as Dell woke up. Berner was washed, dressed, and making breakfast for them in the kitchen and showed Dell a copy of the newspaper somebody had left them with a note that said "Thought you'd like to see this. I'm sure you're very proud" (186). Dell examined the pictures of his parents' mug shots and read about the account of the bank robbery as well as details that his father had been being watched for some time in connection with the beef scheme. The twins decided that they had to go see their parents at the Cascade County Jail before they're extradited to North Dakota.

Berner and Dell visited his parents in jail in Chapter 36. They first encountered their father who seemed disoriented and defiant and kept saying things in his own defense. Berner asked where their mother was. Their father pointed vaguely in a general direction and informed them she was not talking to him anymore. After this awkward encounter, they left him to see their mother.

Analysis

The novel further develops the narrative arc of a displaced or distorted domesticity with the Parsons now in jail, the twins running the household and acting like an adult couple as well as the unorthodox sexual activity between them. Dell's admission to Berner that he knows nothing about sex and that, in a way, she will initiate him evokes a response of "'All right', I said. I wanted to. I didn't care" (184), and this response betrays a resigned willingness as well as evidence that this is not the first time they have shared some sort of incestuous activity. While neither twin seems to feel guilty about it, Dell notes how they do not bring it up again, but it is also important in the sense of illustrating how heteronormative assumptions and heterosexual practices no longer obtain in their house. In fact, no standard heterosexual behavior seems available to the Parsons any longer.

The alienating encounter as they visit their father in jail also demonstrates how what little love or affection has existed in their lives is now mostly extinguished. Their mother no longer is talking to their father (although that is really nothing new) and it takes the

prison guard to explain to Bev that his children have come to see him because they love him. Bev says “I know they do. I love them,” but, as Dell explains, he says it “as if we weren’t there” (195). The distorted little household and pseudo-marriage that Dell and Berner have established now substitutes for their mother’s frustrated affection and their father’s haphazard support. Despite the ugly side their arrangement may possess, it also provides a much stronger foundation for the twins in contrast to all of the uncertainty and chaos of the recent events in their lives.

Discussion Question 1

Why might the author have included incestuous activity between Dell and Berner?

Discussion Question 2

How does Dell feel about the newspaper account of his parents' crime?

Discussion Question 3

How does Bev act when Dell and Berner visit him in jail? Why might this be? How might this have affected Dell and Berner?

Vocabulary

assert, relinquished, extradited

Part 1, Chapters 37-38

Summary

After seeing their father in Chapter 37, Dell and Berner found their mother in a cell with another woman and a suicide sign attached to the bars. Their mother claimed she felt as if a weight had been lifted, but their encounter remained awkward. Berner started crying and demanded to know if she robbed a bank, a question she never answered. She told Dell she was going to write something—a "tragic-comedy" (199) she calls it—and then they left her as her lawyer approaches. In retrospect, Dell says that this was the last time he saw both his parents.

In Chapter 38, the last chapter of Part 1, Dell and Berner walked home and found just how insignificant they were. No police officers, juvenile authorities or social workers had come to check on their welfare, and they stopped on a bridge over the Missouri River. Dell thought about the relativity of life's truths, and concluded that good still existed in the world, despite everything he had experienced. He thought of what would happen to him subsequently "as being about progress and the future," not about loss and the past, "which aren't always easy to see when you're so close to both of them" (203).

Analysis

The end of Part 1 marks a shift in the narrative away from Bev and Neeva and the bank robbery to Dell and his maturity that also highlights the theme of the coming-of-age story in the novel. He muses on truth as an elusive ally, since "its finer points seemed impossible to find among the facts. If there was a hidden design, living almost never shed light on it" (202). Life is a chess game for Dell, both literally and symbolically, since chess involves forethought, strategy, and planning that, whether one wins or loses, a fixed and stable outcome exists even in the potential of playing the game.

The relativity of truth also reveals itself to Dell as he concludes how "everything someone assures me to be true might not be," and rather than making him cynical, which he defines as "believing that good isn't possible" (202), this belief instills some small measure of hope in him. Paralleling his physical and sexual development in the preceding chapters with Berner and Rudy, Dell matures both intellectually and philosophically. His mother confirms this for him when, the last time he sees her in jail, she tells him she would like to know what he thinks of her writing: "You'll have to tell me what you think. You're a smart boy" (199), and the tragic-comedy she writes anticipates the more solid symbol of the chronicle that Dell later reads. Bev has always figured as the traditional role model for Dell, but his mother has influenced him much more so in terms of the life of the mind. Her final quip to him reinforces the kind of life he now decides to live.

Discussion Question 1

How does Neeva react to seeing her children? What does this suggest?

Discussion Question 2

What does Neeva plan on writing? Why might she plan this?

Discussion Question 3

How do Dell and Berner feel after leaving the jail? Why?

Vocabulary

authoritatively, cynical, subordinate

Part 2, Chapters 39-41

Summary

Chapter 39 begins on August 30, 1960 when Mildred Remlinger came to pick up Dell and Berner and drive them to Canada. Berner left the day before, so Dell and Mildred drove north to Havre, Montana where they stopped at a sandwich shop and Dell ate while Mildred smoked. After lunch, they continued to drive north and Mildred informed Dell that she was taking him to Saskatchewan to live with her brother Arthur for a while. She emphasized that it was only temporary and that his mother wanted it this way. Dell objected to the plan, but Mildred told him that if they went back, she would be arrested for kidnapping him and that he would end up in an orphanage. Dell accepted his plight and asked himself what he had to lose. “The answer seemed to be very little” (214).

Mildred and Dell crossed the border into Canada in Chapter 40 and Mildred explained to Dell what Canada was like. He became resigned to his fate, and he learned that Mildred’s brother Arthur was an educated man who had abandoned his studies to become a lawyer because he grew disenchanted with America. Mildred left Dell with some recommendations for his future: “Don’t spend time thinking old gloomy, “she told him, “Your life’s going to be a lot of exciting ways before you’re dead. So just pay attention to the present. Don’t rule parts out, and be sure you’ve always got something you don’t mind losing. That’s important” (218).

Mildred dropped Dell off in Maple Creek, Saskatchewan, where he was turned over to Charley Quarters in Chapter 41. Dell described him as dwarf-like, “small and chesty and dense looking and muscular with an oversized head” (219): “His black greasy hair was clamped in the back with a woman’s rhinestone barrette, and he had slitted blue eyes and big ears” (220). Dell reluctantly left Mildred, who kissed him goodbye, and he concluded “I did what I was told to—as much for my mother as for any reason. I stayed a good son to the end of it” (222).

Analysis

The large-bodied, smoking, gum-chewing Mildred Remlinger, “with short black, curly hair, snapping small dark eyes, red lipstick, a fleshy neck, and powder on her face that masked a bad complexion, though not very well” (208), figures as a kind of wisdom goddess to Dell, which makes sense given the mythological archetype of the young hero’s journey that Canada implicitly invokes here in Chapter 39. Dell wants to return home, even by himself if Berner is no longer there, but he patiently listens to Mildred’s advice which makes good, sound sense. Dell asks her “how do you know what’s really happening to you?” she quips “Oh, you never do”: “There are two different kinds of people in the world…the people who understand you don’t ever know” and “the ones who think you always do. I’m in the former group. It’s safer” (213). Dell thinks that he is in the same group as Mildred, and this decision helps him to accept what lies ahead.

The motif of the journey that involves heroic encounters with sages and mentors, and that complements the larger theme of the coming-of-age story, also implies engaging with the underbelly of life and a descent to the underworld. While Maple Creek, Saskatchewan does not initially appear as a Hades or a Hell, Charley Quarters, as an embodiment of a kind of ghoul or denizen of the dark side, inhabits the novel to teach Dell other kinds of lessons. Charley is smelly, and Mildred keeps pushing his face away from her as he leans into her driver's side window and stares at Dell. Charley also possesses this unnerving way of referring to Dell as "cargo" and "it" as in "Does it have to eat?" (220). Mildred keeps reminding Dell that his parents (as well as Berner) have already made their choices, and she continuously laments the fact that Berner did not go with them to Canada. So Dell is alone, but there is still hope, Mildred explains to him. She pushes him out the door with one last piece of sagely advice: "We don't always get to choose our starts," she tells Dell when he complains that he does not want a new start. "Now, go on," she continues. "We're putting off the inevitable here. This is an adventure. Don't be afraid. You'll be fine. I said so" (221).

Discussion Question 1

Why would Berner run away rather than go with Dell to Canada?

Discussion Question 2

What advice does Mildred Remlinger give Dell? Is it useful or not?

Discussion Question 3

What is Dell's reaction to Charley Quarters?

Vocabulary

inkling, desolate, afflicted, dismal, anomaly, inhospitable, marooned, disenchanted, cultivated, imperiled, unsavory, leered

Part 2, Chapters 42-44

Summary

Charley told Dell in Chapter 42 that he would be working and sleeping on the farm and taking his meals in the hotel that Arthur owned. Charley stopped the truck to urinate and asked Dell what he did to end up there and if Mildred tried to have sex with him. Charley then told Dell how much he admired Hitler because, like himself, Hitler was misunderstood.

In Chapter 43, Dell woke up and found himself in a rundown little house situated in the middle of a junkyard dotted with rusty odd contraptions that formed part of an abandoned-looking town. He heard voices and saw Charley coming to get him. They went to meet Arthur whom Dell had already seen out the window. Arthur struck Dell as a pleasant and good-looking man who told him that if the Royal Canadian Mounted Police came looking for him, he would just say that Dell was his nephew from back east. Dell also noticed how well-dressed Arthur was, and his conversation and mannerisms also rendered him quirky and eccentric. Dell asked how long he had to stay and Arthur told him as long as he liked. When Dell responded with not liking the situation at all, Arthur told him to find a way to leave and walked away.

Chapter 44 consists of a short excerpt from Neeva's "Chronicle of a Crime Committed by a Weak Person," and Dell offers it as evidence that his mother did not live a long time in the prison and that she was already weakening mentally. The excerpt is an open letter to him and Berner that conveys her sense that "this was the end of the family for all of us," which Dell describes as "more than sad" (238).

Analysis

Although Dell is displaced once again, he seems oddly resigned to it. Although he dislikes where he is, his resignation implies a quiet contentment. Perhaps the capriciousness of his life has also bludgeoned the spirit and hope out of him, but he has, so far, not despaired. While he does miss his parents and Berner, he accepts the situation and finds Arthur Remlinger interesting. Dell notes how Arthur seems intelligent, wealthy, and unlike any one else he has ever met—Dell's characterization of him is that he is "consistent" (234)—but possibilities also exist. Florence La Blanc, the woman friend/lover of Arthur, is artistic, and Arthur asks Dell if he plans on attending college. Arthur also permits Dell an independence when he tells him he can stay as long as he likes, and, if he does not like it, he can find a way to leave. This initial exchange is a key moment in the plot as Dell concludes "that was all there was to meeting Arthur Remlinger. As I said, life-changing events can seem not what they are" (236).

The excerpt from Neeva's chronicle also illustrates how his mother's imprisonment and his Canadian freedom have liberated Neeva in a way. Dell describes his mother's

writing style as “the voice in which she would’ve expressed herself if she ever fully could’ve” (237). Her circumstances are dire, but she has also experienced a weird sort of liberation in a feeling of coldness in her heart that she also construes as possibly strength or intelligence. And while Dell concedes that the situation is “more than sad” (237), perhaps Neeva has finally found her own voice, even though it must speak from behind four walls of a prison cell.

Discussion Question 1

What does Charley's comparison of himself to Hitler mean?

Discussion Question 2

How does Arthur Remlinger strike Dell? Why?

Discussion Question 3

Why is the excerpt from Neeva's chronicle inserted at this point in the novel?

Vocabulary

intruded, successive, lurched, makeshift, brash, blemished

Part 2, Chapters 45-47

Summary

In Chapter 45, Dell began to work at Arthur's dive of a hotel, the Leonard, in the small prairie town of Fort Royal four miles down the road, where he cleaned the rooms for the nomadic group of oil-rig roughnecks and railroad-gang boys among other men whose work kept them moving across the prairie. Dell explored the town of Fort Royal, and one time when he was standing in front of the drugstore a woman and her daughter, who were Mormon, asked him where he was from. When Dell told the woman his uncle was Arthur Remlinger she seemed concerned, but then walked away. When not at work Dell returned to Partreau where he stayed and became despondent over his circumstances, but then decided to examine the wrecked and abandoned town. Dell thought about all of the life "that had gone on there, not of life cast aside" (253), and began to feel better about where he was now living.

As the fall approached in Chapter 46, Dell spent time helping Charley with the hunters who came to shoot geese in season and stay at the Leonard while they were there. Dell distrusted Charley, whom he noticed sometimes wore makeup or perfume and dyed his hair black, and he longed to go back to school. Charley told Dell he knew his parents were bank robbers, which Dell admitted, to which Charley responded "I don't think that's so bad" (260). Charley refused to answer Dell when he asked why Arthur never talked to him, then shot and missed a coyote. He insisted that he would kill that same coyote one day, since "his death and my death are playmates," and Dell thought that Charley "seemed to be involved in life too much through death" (262).

Despite their seemingly pleasant initial interaction, Dell and Arthur remained strangers to one another in Chapter 47. Dell thought that Arthur might be involved in some shady business which he referred to as an "enterprise" or "a significance that was hidden from view and wished to stay hidden" (266). Dell was charged with cleaning Arthur's rooms on the third floor of the Leonard and he examined his belongings, noting the books, the classical records, and the chess set that he had as well as the family photos on the wall. Dell found that Arthur owned a pistol. He removed it from the shoulder holster and studied it, and its presence confirmed Dell's suspicion that Arthur was "an unknown and unpredictable person," since "the pistol seemed a very definite and dangerous thing" (269-270). He returned the pistol to its holster and left because he suddenly feared that he would be found out.

Analysis

Dell's tour of Partreau, which he thinks will be like stepping into the trappings of an ossified museum, actually endows him with a sense of hope and renewal. The decay of Partreau thus stands as a symbol of Dell's future in that he still has one even though it initially looks otherwise. He characterizes these feelings as assimilating with his

environment, and it is a solitary endeavor. “You did it alone,” he explains, “and not with others or for them” (253). Dell’s definition is a curious one, but it continues to illustrate his maturity and even perhaps security. He is a survivor, and although his living conditions seem harsh, his daily routine provides him with a predictability unlike his previous life with his parents. But Dell also understands that this state also possesses its own instability, yet he remains content with this uncertainty: “This state of mind conferred another freedom on me and was like starting life over…or becoming someone else…. I could like it or hate it, but the world would change around me no matter what I felt” (253). His feeling of freedom stands in stark contrast to his parents’ imprisonment, but, like everything else in his life, it will prove to be fleeting.

The intimidating and queer presence of Charley unsettles whatever solidity Dell manages to achieve, and he remains distrustful of Charley because of his preoccupation with killing animals. Dell’s perceptions signal a moment of foreboding in the novel, since he has alluded to murders that up to this point are unknown. Charley’s dangerous potential has already been revealed through his admiration of Hitler and his determination to kill the coyote which, like any other living creature, simply goes about its business unconsciously. Dell’s comment about Charley living too much through death causes him to quip in retrospect that if he wanted Charley “to show me more about it, or tell me (which I never intended to do), he would’ve. Then that was all I would’ve learned” (262) echoes his previous allusions to these heretofore unknown killings, but it is clear at this point that Dell will somehow be involved in yet more personal disaster.

Dell’s discovery that Arthur owns a gun reinforces his comprehension of an impending doom that the silver pistol symbolizes. Despite his efforts to live a normal life, he realizes that he has been mistaken. “Arthur Remlinger didn’t seem to me to be a man who would own a pistol,” he says. “He seemed too cultivated—which was clearly my error” (270). This line tidily sums up the pathos of Dell’s life as he struggles for normality yet, given the vagaries of life, they continue to thwart his most sincere attempts at being an average teenager and growing into adulthood.

Discussion Question 1

What does the Mormon woman's reaction to what Dell tells her about Arthur Remlinger mean?

Discussion Question 2

What does Charley's mild effeminacy indicate about him?

Discussion Question 3

What does Dell conclude about Arthur after he cleans his rooms?

Vocabulary

putrid, rank, enlivened, unadorned, featureless, ne'er-do-wells, temperance, attired, peculiar, treacherous, forlorn, plagued, morbid, conferred, abattoir, despondent, abject, perverted, grudgingly, conceivably, conniving, upheaval, clamorous, elemental, mimicked, recedes, misgivings, personage

Part 2, Chapters 48-50

Summary

Dell tried to make the best of his domestic situation in Chapter 48 by cleaning up the two-room drafty shack he lived in. He discovered in the many cardboard boxes containing Arthur's possessions that he seemed reactionary politically, as evinced by the picture of hooded members of the Ku Klux Klan standing before a blazing cross that he found and conservative articles that Arthur wrote in journals while attending Harvard. Dell also came across lots of old possessions abandoned by people who perhaps had "put that life behind them for a crack at a better one somewhere else," and this recognition reminded him of his parents as "people running from the past, who didn't look back at much if they could help it, and whose whole life always lay somewhere in the offing" (277).

In Chapter 49, Dell went about his work with Charley and the American geese hunters as he tried to enroll in a wayward school for girls run by nuns that he heard about. He rode his bike out of town quite a distance and found the Sisters of the Holy Name School where two students and a nun (whom Dell thought could not be much older than he) made it clear that he was not welcome. One of the girls, Marjorie, grabbed his wrist from behind the fence where he stood on his bike and pulled him toward her with the sexual suggestion of making a man or a "mess" out of him (285). The nun accosted him, asked where he lived while Marjorie said she wanted to kiss him. The nun ordered him to leave and never come back or she would call the constables. Dell felt desperate and rode his bike back to Partreau.

Dell moved from his shack to a small room on the third floor of the Leonard at the beginning of Chapter 50. Before he moved, however, Florence arrived to drop off a packet for him and to paint a picture of the street near Dell's shack. Dell went over to her and they had a pleasant chat about the difference between Canada and America, though Dell could not understand why she had chosen to paint the ugly old post office. Dell suddenly asked her if she knew why he was staying with Arthur, and she asked him if it bothered him that Arthur paid him no attention. He answered "sometimes" and she told him not to let it bother him because "people are never going to do just what you want them to" (294). She also told him that she knew what his parents did. Dell asked her how she met Arthur (in a bar in 1950 after her boyfriend at the time left her stranded) and also told him it was her idea to have him move since one of the hunters would now be staying in the shack and she did not think it appropriate. She finally told him simply to "go with the Flo" and drove him to Fort Royal to take him to dinner (297). The chapter concludes with Dell's saying it was his last day in Partreau.

Analysis

Dell struggles with his loneliness, but his attempts to keep busy, explore his surroundings, check out the girls' school, and talk to Florence contribute to the settling of his soul, which his conversation with Florence reinforces. His exchange with the wayward girls, the nun, and Florence's insistence that he not sleep in the same room with a grown man also reignite the novel's thematic examination of Dell's sexuality. Charley laughs at the thought that "the old drunk goose shooters could 'get lovey' after midnight" (288), and Dell keeps three old photographs of naked women he finds while he rustles among Arthur's belongings. His confrontation with Marjorie in which she tells him she wants to have sex with him and kiss him attests to the lascivious character of these wayward girls. By contrast the nun, in her stern virginity and black habit that to Dell seems to swallow her body and, with it, her own young sexuality, disconcerts Dell. He leaves feeling "desperate" (287) because of his unrealized education and the harsh, insulting way he has been treated. Dell still seems idealistic, and his interaction with the cruel world continue to discourage his sincere efforts to go to school and find his place in the world.

Dell does find an ally in Florence, who tells him "I can't really look after you, but I can try to be aware of you" and prompts her to quip that his mother would thank her for it (296). Florence is a mother herself who is intelligent and non-judgmental, and her admiration for the Nighthawk School of art, her references to Edward Hopper, Marcel Duchamp, and her Russian pronunciation of Sputnik (as in "Spootnik") all appeal to Dell. In contrast to the wayward girls and the insolent nun, Florence genuinely likes Dell, and her influence in removing him from Partreau to Fort Royal renders her a kind of savior figure to Dell. Her care for him also evinces itself in the smallest of gestures, such as taking him to get something to eat for supper. The last line of Chapter 50 sounds pregnant with foreboding as Dell says "it was my last day in Partreau" (297), but for now he appreciates how Florence talks to him as one adult to another and not as a parent to a child, despite her maternal tendencies.

While Dell does not quite equate Florence with his mother, he confesses how he "believed my mother knew something like this would happen—that a person would notice me and see that I was worth something and not leave me to be lost" (297). Dell still inhabits the in-between state of adolescence that consists of no longer being a child but not quite being an adult. He does realize, however, that he is worthwhile, and does not "think people who were worth something could get lost forever, even if you couldn't explain everything about yourself" and "why you were where you were" (297). As a novel of development or coming-of-age, Canada thus situates itself in the tradition of tracing the maturity of confused but curious adolescent boys, such as Holden Caufield in J. D. Salinger's Catcher in the Rye. This subtextual structure of the novel thus casts Florence as a helper figure or gentle mentor who now assists Dell as he continues to grow up.

Discussion Question 1

What does Dell discover among Arthur's personal belongings in his shack? What does this imply about Arthur?

Discussion Question 2

What is significant about Dell's encounter with the nun at the girls' school?

Discussion Question 3

How is Dell's reaction to Florence's painting a critique of art in general?

Vocabulary

scavenged, entailed, sacrificial, scant, divulging, dignified, hefty, remitted, fantastical, wayward, spindly, billowed, waggle, constitute, succumbed, primitive, furrowed, eccentric

Part 2, Chapters 51-53

Summary

The packet Florence gave Dell in Chapter 51 had been mailed by Mildred. It contained a short note by Mildred, which she signed “Your old friend, Mildred R.” (298), informing Dell she would attend his parents’ trial. He also found a letter from Berner addressed to their house in Great Falls, and a copy of the Great Falls Tribune with a front-page story of the robbery. Dell read this account, and it gave him a painless ache but also a sense of relief that he now knew his parents’ fate.

Chapter 52 consists of the letter Berner had written Dell. She was living in San Francisco with some other people. Rudy never met up with her in Washington Square Park like he was supposed to do. She was not angry but told Dell she did not love Rudy. She was doing well overall, had changed her appearance, and asked Dell to write her. She also told Dell about a recurring dream of having killed someone and wondered if he ever woke up “feeling like [he’s] been crying and running a race” (304), since they were twins and experienced the world in the same ways.

In Chapter 53 Dell now lived in a small room in the Leonard and continued to work with the American geese hunters. He described how they joked about their wives, bragged about their children’s achievements, and how they thought Canada was “mysterious and romantic” but that it was nonetheless inferior to America (307).

Analysis

These short chapters function primarily to move the plot along as Dell learns his parents’ trial is about to commence in North Dakota, the whereabouts of Berner is identified, and Dell comes in closer proximity to Arthur. In her letter, Berner writes that she thinks their parents have ruined their lives, but still misses them. Although ambivalent, Berner has matured and seems contented, but she reveals to Dell a recurring dream that she has killed someone. Since they are twins, she thinks that Dell sees the world in exactly the same way, so this murderous dream also contributes to the feelings of foreboding Dell has. On the other hand, Dell’s relief or “satisfaction” (300) upon learning his parents’ fate provides him with a small sense of closure, and he stops worrying so much about them. In a small way he is moving on and realizes that he really is an adult now. He used to fantasize that his parents would show up and whisk him away, but now concludes “I’d all but said good-bye to my childhood on the strength of their terrible fall” (301). Still, the imminent danger that the novel is building up to is foreshadowed by Dell’s admission in retrospect how his life in Fort Royal, although somewhat normal, “didn’t last long and ended in disaster” (305).

Discussion Question 1

What is important about the packet Mildred has sent Dell?

Discussion Question 2

How has the relationship between Dell and Berner changed?

Discussion Question 3

What does Dell's response to the American geese hunters say about him?

Vocabulary

regrettable, apprehended, desperadoes, gaudy, haphazard, gruff, inclined

Part 2, Chapters 54-56

Summary

Dell began associating with Arthur more in Chapter 54. On one particular outing, Arthur was driving 90 miles per hour, and as his Buick approached six pheasants in the road, he neither slowed down nor went around them. The car struck them in a whirl of bird bodies and feathers and Arthur merely said, “You see a lot of those birds out here” (310). In complete shock and disbelief, Dell said “I was astonished” (310). They stopped at a café for lunch and Dell wanted to ask Arthur why he hit the birds but did not. Arthur explained to him how unnatural and difficult it was to live in Canada, and told him how the Russian novelist Leo Tolstoy paid for peasants to relocate to Canada. He also asked Dell if he thought of himself as “unsteady” (311) (Mildred had told her brother so) and if he thought he had a “clear mind” (312). Arthur also said that “people who hold a lot inside and have a lot to hold inside” should read biographies of great generals, since “they know plans work out very, very rarely, and failure’s the rule. They know what it is to be unimaginably bored. And they know all about death” (314). Arthur and Dell left the café after talking about adapting to one’s environment, since Arthur felt as if he did not belong in Canada and that he would like to travel abroad to Italy. Dell thought how “people belonged where I found them” (315).

In Chapter 55, Charley told Dell how Arthur had committed crimes, evaded the authorities, and had violent tendencies and volatile moods. Dell understands in retrospect that Arthur’s curious character was somewhat of a test Dell had to undergo to see if he could be trusted to be a “special son” (317) to Arthur. “He needed me to do what sons do for their fathers,” he explains, which was to “bear witness that they’re substantial, that they’re not hollow, not ringing absences” (317). Dell let himself be “taken up” by Arthur and Florence as his interaction with them increased (317).

Chapter 56 begins in early October as Dell fell under the influence and tutelage of Arthur, who instructed him to call him Arthur (not "Sir"), taught him how to use chop sticks and drink tea at a Chinese restaurant, had dinner with him and Florence, and treated him like a real son. Arther also gave Dell a small notebook and told him to keep his thoughts in it but to show them to no one. Arthur also shared his opinions with Dell. He quoted the political philosopher Jean Jacques Rousseau on “tyrannical government” (which he detested), and he also detested “churches and all political parties—particularly the Democrats” (321), as well as FDR, “the man in the chair” or “the crippled man” who “had seduced the country and betrayed it to the Jews and the unions” (321). As Thanksgiving Day in Canada approached, Dell flirted with Betty Arcenault, one of the Filipino girls who provided the men in the Leonard with company, but professed to not wanting to do anything with her sexually. He also had Thanksgiving dinner with Arthur and Florence, who told him “she’d been thinking about a plan for [his] future” (323). She told him to move to Winnipeg before Christmas to live with her son so that he could start high school. She also told him to become a naturalized Canadian citizen, just like Arthur,

and when Dell learned this fact, Arthur suddenly seemed less interesting to him as a Canadian citizen rather than an American originally from Michigan.

Analysis

Dell's chaotic and uncertain life in Montana has somewhat prepared him for the potential violence embodied by Arthur, as the pheasant-running-over episode demonstrates mildly (relatively speaking). Like the hunted geese, the pheasants symbolize beautiful and harmless creatures just living by their instincts, yet are destroyed simply for sport or cruelty. The birds contribute to the mindless and unnecessary violence that surrounds Dell, and the dangers in life hidden among the beauty that will encounter because of Arthur. He grooms Dell to be a "special son" (317) he can depend upon for something—Dell is not quite sure what yet—but Dell's own feelings for Arthur as a kind of father figure begin to replicate his conflicted relationship with his own father. Dell wants Arthur to like, admire, and pay attention to him, but Dell also senses something sinister in Arthur's treatment of him. While having lunch with Dell in the café, Arthur also tells him that his life can be more than just being "the young son of bank robbers and desperadoes" (314). This paternal concern Arthur cultivates (or seems to cultivate) for Dell is tarnished or tainted by Arthur's odd behavior, his initial ambivalence toward Dell, his reactionary political ranting, and his criminal history that Dell learns from Charley. But Dell has always been searching for a place to settle, to call home and adapt to, and Arthur, at least momentarily, offers Dell some solidity and security as he takes care of and educates him.

Arthur's interest in Dell comes with the price of being this "special son" however (317), and while Dell provides no evidence that it is of a sexual nature, Dell's own vacant and distorted sexuality evinced by his lack of interest in Betty Arcenault and his incestuous activity with Berner (which he recalls after his puzzled reaction to Betty) render this suggestion most plausible. These chapters continue to develop the path to a kind of personal hell as he hurtles along at breakneck speed in Arthur's Buick, and as he recognizes "that no matter the evidence of your life, or who you believe you are, or what you're willing to take credit for or draw your vital strength and pride from—anything at all can follow anything at all" (316). Dell's tough situation will only grow worse, despite his sincere attempts to concentrate on his work and not be distracted and depressed by the memory of his family. Dell has thus far been a poignant and relatable protagonist in the novel, so readers may appreciate and champion Arthur's own fondness for Dell. But the imminent violence feels about to explode, and Dell tries to formulate in his own confused and uninformed 15-year-old mind "the feeling when something around you isn't good, when there are threats" and "that it means you're out on some empty expanse all by yourself and you're exposed, and caution needs to be exerted" (318).

Dell's impression of Arthur when he learns he has become a Canadian citizen makes him seem "less interesting" and "less significant" (325). While many layers cover Arthur, Dell starts peeling Arthur down to his dangerous core of violence. Florence's own suggestion that Dell leave Fort Royal to live with her son Roland in Winnipeg figures as her way of protecting him most likely, though Arthur does not object at this point to Dell's

going away. Dell has no response to her plan for him. His perception of “the only real difference between one place on earth and another” as “how you think about the people, and the difference it makes to you to think that way” is cryptic (325). Still, it illustrates Dell’s ongoing struggle to find a real home, family, and secure space in the world.

Discussion Question 1

Why does Arthur run over the pheasants? What does this reveal about his character?

Discussion Question 2

Why does Charley tell Dell about Arthur?

Discussion Question 3

How are Arthur's political views important?

Vocabulary

catapulted, personable, inquisitively, enmeshed, backwater, gabbling, erroneous, venal, clamoring

Part 2, Chapters 57-59

Summary

Dell wrote a letter to Berner in Chapter 57, but did not tell her much, only that he was living in Canada and failed to mention his parents or his life with Arthur and Florence. He decided not to send the letter and to write a more substantial one once he got to Winnipeg. He placed it in his pillowcase that contained his belongings from Great Falls and thought about re-reading it later. He mentioned how he never wrote his thoughts down in the little notebook Arthur had given him, and that he left it behind when he left Fort Royal.

In Chapter 58, Charley told Dell the whole story of Arthur Remlinger so that he could "set strict limits for [him]self" (328), and had Dell retrieve something from his trailer, Dell thought, so he could "see how a life without set limits could look" (330). The trailer was filled with the filthy and disparate trappings of Charley's life, and Dell equated the smell in Charley's trailer with that of Charley's body odor. He also notices Charley's cosmetic case containing the trappings of his ambivalent sexuality. When Dell later hung around Charley, he recognized this same body odor and became somewhat aroused by it. He interpreted this "attraction to his smell" (330) as an instance of not setting limits for himself. Charley told Dell that in 1943 Arthur lost his good paying summer job in a Chevrolet factory in Detroit because of his anti-union views and, as a result, did not have any money to pay his tuition at Harvard in the fall. This loss precipitated a mental breakdown since Harvard refused to give him a scholarship because of his reactionary political leanings, so he moved to Elmira, New York to work on a dairy farm with people who shared his extreme, rightwing views. Arthur became enmeshed in a plot to set a bomb behind a union hall in Detroit that ended up killing the union's vice president. Arthur fled to Canada in 1945 and got along with the help of political sympathizers in the shack where Dell first lived when he arrived. Charley had long resented Arthur and told Dell that he would have left long ago, except that he was a kind of indentured servant to Arthur because he possessed secret knowledge about Charley he did not want revealed. Now, 15 years after the crime, two men arrived in Fort Royal from Detroit, the scene of the crime, to confront Arthur.

The two Americans from Detroit, Raymond Jepps and Louis Crosley, appeared the same day Charley told Dell to be cautious around Arthur at the beginning of Chapter 60. They asked Mrs. Gedins, a Swedish woman who works at the hotel, if they could have lunch and shoot geese, but she discouraged them by saying the kitchen was closed and that they would have to talk to Arthur about hunting geese. They walked to a Chinese restaurant down the street, and Dell overheard what they planned. Dell had a moment of confusion—what he thought of as a mini-breakdown—because he felt conflicted about Arthur's being a murderer, since he believed a murderer had the name "'murderer' written on his face" (349). He decided that Arthur was not the murderer Charley had described.

Analysis

Dell claims to dislike Charley as dangerous and perverted, but the long story he tells about Arthur's past and his crime functions as a cautionary tale—literally—to prevent Dell from becoming like he has turned out to be—the prisoner of secret knowledge held against him. Arthur's flight to Canada and refusal to face justice long delayed for 15 years have also held him a prisoner as well. His loss of a Harvard education, his professional aspirations to become a lawyer, and his ultra-conservative political views have thwarted his personal life. He is given to unpredictable rages and a blind violence (as the pheasant episode illustrates) produced perhaps from repressed guilt and an unresolved conclusion to the bombing, which he now must confront in the figures of Jepps and Crosley. Charley's cautionary tale now places him in a kind of paternal role that somewhat softens the perverted threat he has represented to Dell. Dell has previously worried that Charley would confront him while on the toilet or that he would grab him and do something terrible to him. Dell, however, experiences a sexual excitement at the smell of Charley's body. He lingers in his presence, knows he is inhaling the odor, and to Dell this represents another personal transgression. The cosmetic box Dell notices symbolizes Charley's complicated and, as Freud would say, "overdetermined" sexuality, since the case stabilizes competing and contradictory meanings. Dell's ambivalence toward Charley parallels his conflicted relationship with Arthur, and his own confusion becomes obvious in his decision that Arthur is not a murderer, as well as in the minor episode where he writes a letter to Berner, does not send it, and claims never to have written in the notebook Arthur gave him.

The metaphoric prisons that surround Charley and Arthur contrast with the literal prison his parents inhabit. While Arthur has up until now not suffered for the consequences of his actions, Bev and Neeva have. Their presence in Dell's memory guides his actions, and he recalls how his "mother had written in her chronicle that to me the opposite of everything obvious deserved full consideration" (349). As young as he is, Dell now makes his own decisions, draws his own conclusions, and fulfills his apprenticeship, as in the novel of development's also being termed an "apprenticeship novel." Dell no longer believes anything he is told. He realizes Charley has no reason to lie and does him a favor by telling him to define boundaries between himself and Arthur and others, but he grows skeptical and thinks the men from Detroit might not be who Charley says. Dell even confesses to believing that perhaps everyone committed crimes. While not true that everyone is a criminal, this way of thinking reflects his belief that conceptualization creates reality related to the storytelling motif of the novel in the sense that thinking or telling it makes it so. Dell decides at the end of Chapter 59 "to believe that Arthur Remlinger was innocent of what he was supposed to have done—since in all ways it seemed better to think that" (349).

Discussion Question 1

Why does Dell not mail his letter to Berner?

Discussion Question 2

Why does Charley have Dell go inside his trailer?

Discussion Question 3

Why would Jepps and Crosley suddenly come looking for Arthur after so many years?

Vocabulary

commonplace, plight, debased, wretched, disreputable, plundered, chaotic, flattering, pacifist, articulate, inflammatory, isolationist, renounced, irreparable, vexed, ossifying, dandyish, indentured, factotum, fluke, incriminating, squandered, tentative, fathom

Part 2, Chapters 60-62

Summary

Dell sat in the bar of the Leonard in Chapter 60, admired the oil painting of “two bull moose locked in combat, their antlers tangled in a way they’d never escape” called Their Fight to the Death (351), and observed Jepps and Crosley as they drank a beer and nervously waited for Arthur to appear. Dell had not seen him that day, and he thought it may have had something to do with the two Americans. It excited Dell “to have the advantage over them” (353), since they did not know that he knew who they were. He feared the imminent outcome might have been bad. Arthur entered the bar and socialized with the customers, then saw and approached Jepps and Crosley. They talked good-naturedly for a little bit, and Arthur said he would arrange for them to shoot geese the next day. Dell believes Arthur had deceived the Americans and felt relief, but then worried about his own deceptive and fraudulent life since coming to Canada. He fell asleep and dreamed about walking down the street of Fort Royal on a sunny day in August as Jepps and Crosley asked him questions about Arthur.

Chapter 61 begins on Friday, October 14. Charley and Dell skinned and cleaned the geese the hunters had shot, and Charley was in a bad mood. He made odd pronouncements such as “it’s hard to go through life without killing someone” (359). Dell tried to eavesdrop on the two Americans as they ate lunch in the dining room. He addressed one of the hunters at the next table so the Americans could hear Dell’s American accent. They did not notice him and continued to talk intensely to one another. Dell left the dining room to take a nap.

Florence brought Dell a copy of a Canadian history in Chapter 62 titled Building the Canadian Nation by George Brown. He answered his door wearing only his underwear and she told him to put some clothes on. She then apologized for catching him “unawares,” but then also mentioned how she has kids. “You’re all the same,” she quipped (62). She left, Dell shut and locked his door, and he listened to her descend the stairs until she reached the bottom.

Analysis

Dell's excitement about the presence of the two Americans (whom he likes and wants them to like him) manifests itself as somewhat perverse given what is about to happen. Yet, Dell is still very young and possibly enjoys the unfolding drama like a child. He has altered what he calls his “reverse thinking” about Arthur’s guilt and Jepps’ and Crosley’s intentions (351). Dell predicts a bad end for those potentially involved as the painting Their Fight to the Death foreshadows. The picture functions as the most traditional symbol in the novel as a visual embodiment of impotent and senseless conflict that will never result in anything, since the image of the intertangled antlers of the two moose, factually inescapable and aesthetically eternal, freezes them in time and in space. Dell’s

fascination with the picture (he remarks that years later he sees it again somewhere and stares at it for hours) reinforces his unhealthy interest in death, yet Dell normalizes or naturalizes the causes of bad events: “The prelude to very bad things can be ridiculous, as Charley said, but can also be casual and unremarkable. Which is worth recognizing, since it indicates where many bad events originate: from just an inch away from the everyday” (360).

Dell now quotes Charley, so perhaps his love/hate relationship with Charley (in the sense that he seems sexually turned on by him but fears and dislikes him) betrays some of his own similar traits. The importance or value of the quotation does lie in what the twentieth-century philosopher Hannah Arendt called the “banality of evil,” which now surfaces as another major theme of the novel. In other words, boring and unlikely nobodies can commit horrible atrocities. Arthur Remlinger, after all, is hardly interesting. He represents a failed and self-important flunky (Charley understands Arthur’s pretentiousness better than anyone), kicked out of Harvard for his extreme views, reckless enough to drive a bomb to Detroit, and so cruel as to run over a bunch of inoffensive pheasants.

Dell’s tendency to normalize horrible events, however, also reintroduces the attempts at creating a domestic bliss that have peppered the novel. Florence’s giving Dell the book about Canada resurrects her plan for him to move to Winnipeg and start high school, though their exchange is odd given how he answers the door in his underwear and mentions how “only Charley Quarters ever came to my door—to wake me up early,” and how he “wouldn’t have opened it undressed in front of him” (361). While Florence’s good intentions will never be realized, a small sense of hope that Dell can once again be a normal teenager still runs through the novel.

Discussion Question 1

Why does Dell admire the painting of the moose locked in conflict?

Discussion Question 2

Why does Dell want to get close to the two Americans who come looking for Arthur?

Discussion Question 3

Why does Florence give Dell the book about Canada?

Vocabulary

contemptuously, privileged, profanities, paraphernalia

Part 2, Chapters 63-65

Summary

Dell waited in the kitchen for Charley to pick him up when Arthur entered and told him they were going for a drive at the beginning of Chapter 63. Dell did not want to go but could not refuse Arthur. Dell stalled by saying he had to use the bathroom as he remembered his father saying “our most profound experiences are physical events” (365). Thinking about it at that moment, Dell dismissed this interpretation of life and believed “what mattered more…was how you felt about things; what you assumed; what you thought and feared and remembered” (366). Dell drew this conclusion because he feared that Arthur was about to confront the two Americans, so he decided that nothing would happen. But after thinking more about the arrival and presence of Jepps and Crosley, Dell changed his mind and decided his father was right after all about the power of physical events. From the bathroom window, Dell saw Arthur talking to another man in the rain and snow. Arthur looked up at the window, grew angry, and signaled Dell to come outside. Dell reluctantly left.

Arthur drove in the blizzard to Partreau in Chapter 64, and told Dell he thought he was a “secret agent” (370) because he was one himself. He also said that the two Americans (whom they were meeting) would say some things about him that were not true, and if he told the men that Dell was his son, not to contradict him. Dell felt sick to his stomach at the thought of Arthur as his father, and he was unable to concentrate on anything else as they arrived at the shack where Dell used to live. The two Americans’ car was parked there. Arthur explained how Dell did not need to say anything, since he was “going to show these two yokels the kind of man” he was (372). Dell wanted to refuse but feared if he did Arthur would turn on him. Arthur and Dell headed toward the shack.

In Chapter 65 Dell and Arthur met Jepps and Crosley in the shack. Arthur introduced Dell as his son, which surprised the two men. Jepps said he used to be a police officer and told Arthur he knew people went to jail for doing one thing wrong when they did not have to, since “if they could explain to me what they’d done, I knew they would never have crossed that line again” (376). Arthur pretended not to understand. Jepps and Crosley wanted him to admit he had left the bomb, and that they would return to America and never see him again. Dell realized the two men were not simply going to leave, and that Arthur had brought him there to delay the inevitable violence, i.e. not wanting to shoot Arthur immediately because of the presence of his “son” (371). Arthur told them that he did have something to confess that was not appropriate to be talked about in front of his “son,” so he told them he would put Dell in the car and come back to talk. Arthur told Dell to get in the car and start it up as he retrieved his pistol from the driver’s side visor. From the car, Dell saw Arthur shoot Jepps and Crosley and heard the gun pop five times. Arthur looked down at Jepps and spoke angrily while pointing his finger at him. Arthur looked up at Dell, who saw “his lips moving vociferously” (381). While Dell could not hear what Arthur said, he knew that the words meant “Now, then. Now, that’s settled, isn’t it? Once and for all” (381).

Analysis

The soundless violence of Arthur's pantomime-like killing of Jepps and Crosley erupts as the climax of the novel. This terrifying scene reinforces the profundity of physical events that Dell's father insisted on and discredits Dell's privileging of thought as the determining factor of existence. For the most part, Dell has lived a life, according to him, of "just waiting and anticipating" (365). In other words, "real life" occurs in the mind as Dell has tried to forget the past and not think about the future as he struggles to get through each day. But the murders of the two Americans possess a horrific immediacy as Arthur shoots Jepps and Crosley, even though the surreal event does not seem like it is happening at all. Arthur justifies and normalizes the shooting of the men, since he considers them "ridiculous" (380). He says to Dell how he is going to tell them "what they need to hear" because "they'll never leave [him] alone now" (380). Arthur's plan "to make this plain to them" and then "go have supper" with Dell and Florence exemplifies the theme of Hannah Arendt's characterization of the banality of evil in the sense that killing Jepps and Crosley is just something he has to do before he eats. His attitude renders what he does even more ghoulish and unsettling as Dell explains how Arthur calmly enters with the pistol and methodically goes about business as ordinary: "I saw Jepps' face acknowledge him. And Arthur raised his silver pistol…and shot him. …I saw Jepps lying on the linoleum, his big feet apart" (381). The sudden but ordinary manner in which Jepps, whom Dell has always described as heavy, is converted into a big body lying on an uninteresting floor sounds alarming but also familiar. After shooting Crosley next, who tries to hide behind a cot for protection, Arthur "almost casually" turns back to Jepps, whose "left foot agitate[s] up and down very fast" (381), and shoots his head or face at very close range. The disturbing image of Jepps' foot moving quickly up and down shocks Dell after Arthur has transmogrified its normal movement into something grotesque but still comprehensible.

Arthur's bizarre behavior typifies his sociopathic and pompous self-justification as he points at and lectures Jepps, who clearly can no longer hear him. Arthur singles out Jepps and unleashes his deranged fury on him since Jepps did most of the talking and Crosley played an inferior role when they confronted Arthur. The soundlessness of the murder forces Dell to make up his own meaning for Arthur's words, but the five gun pops he hears from Arthur's pistol are somewhat muted. Dell attributes their muffled sound to the fact that the pistol, because it is "not a large caliber," is also referred to as "a lady's gun" (381). The gun also symbolizes the feminization of Arthur, since it contributes to Arthur's impotent outrage as he yells at a dead body. After Arthur shoots Jepps the second time, "he said something very animated. He seemed to make a face at Jepps, and pointed a finger down at him, and thrust the finger at him three times…" (381). Arthur makes himself look like a fool in this scene. He has no evidence the men planned on killing him—if they had had guns they would have produced them—and his decision to murder them consists of the cowardice with which he originally avoided the authorities to flee to Canada and portray himself as superior to everyone else. The final image of a crazed Arthur yelling toward Dell terrifies him as he cannot imagine what his expression must have looked like to Arthur. His conviction that the words that "never reached my ears" mean that the situation is "settled…once and for all" (381) solidifies

the depiction of Arthur as a bombastic killer whose every violent decision made up to now has been right.

Discussion Question 1

How does Dell feel about going on a drive with Arthur?

Discussion Question 2

Why does Arthur introduce Dell as his son to Jepps and Crosley?

Discussion Question 3

Why does Arthur kill the two Americans? What does this decision show readers about Arthur's character?

Vocabulary

declamatory, elicit, imposing, aerate, reproval, vociferously

Part 2, Chapters 66-67

Summary

Dell, Charley and Ollie Gedins (Mrs. Gedins' son and the man Dell saw Arthur talking to from the bathroom window) buried the bodies in the fields where the hunters shoot geese in Chapter 66. Dell reflected that Arthur used him—he never had a plan to improve Dell and he never cared. He concluded by saying "put all these elements together and you'll make as much sense as can be made" (383).

It is October 18, four days after the murders, in Chapter 67. Florence bought Dell a suitcase, a bus ticket, and gave him a small oil painting of the view where Dell lived in Partreau. He took a bus to Winnipeg to live with Florence's son and go to school. He never said anything to anyone about the murders.

Analysis

These two chapters consist of Dell's meditative musings about the events. He understands that he was simply a "point of reference" to Arthur, "like a hammer left in a photograph, present only to provide the scale…and that exhausts its value once the picture's taken" (382). He does not consider Arthur enigmatic or interesting any longer—he is just a man who murdered three people—and the fact that Charley and Arthur resume their same lives indicates that while they have not moved on, Dell has. As a 15-year old whose parents robbed a bank and who has inadvertently and passively participated in the murder of Jepps and Crosley, he has learned some harsh lessons. His apprenticeship is over. He has grown up despite all of the bad circumstances, and now possesses, as he says, "generosity, longevity, acceptance, relinquishment, and letting the word come to me—and, with those things, to make a life" (391).

Discussion Question 1

What does Dell think about Arthur after burying the bodies of the two Americans?

Discussion Question 2

How does Florence act around Dell now?

Discussion Question 3

Why does Dell go to Winnipeg?

Vocabulary

nonentities, infuriated, liberate, lethal, quotient, surety, longevity

Part 3, Chapters 68-69

Summary

Dell is now 66 years old and an English teacher in Chapter 68, and in his classes privileges the novels of Thomas Hardy, especially The Mayor of Casterbridge. He has become a Canadian citizen, married a Canadian girl, and lives in Windsor, Ontario. He and his wife, Clare, have no children. They occasionally take trips back to the States, and at one point they stop in Fort Royal. He has told her his story but never talks much about it. He discovers Fort Royal barely exists any longer. They drive to Partreau, which is now completely gone, and he stands near the graves of Jepps and Crosley. Dell tries to make sense of it all but can't. Dell leaves Partreau again. This time it is forever.

Dell visits Berner in the Twin Cities in Chapter 69. She is ill and dying. Dell has previously learned his mother committed suicide in the North Dakota prison, but that his father is still alive and with Berner. (Bev has posted a "looking for" message on a website that his students found for him.) Dell has seen his sister only three times over the last 50 years, and she has lived an unstable life. She is an alcoholic who has gone through three husbands and multiple jobs. Dell learns that the name "Bev Parsons" on the message board is Berner, who changed her name years ago. She has cancer, is on chemotherapy and has only a few months to live. When she pulls up in a dented blue Probe, Dell says she looks terrible. She takes him to eat at Applebee's, and gives him the copy of their mother's chronicle, which Mildred Remlinger had sent her a long time ago. Dell returns to Canada and Berner dies soon after Thanksgiving Day in 2010.

Analysis

The novel's conclusion that presents the older Dell, Berner, and their reunion is as open-ended as the life Dell has led. Though he has achieved some satisfaction as a teacher, and the literature he teaches provides him with some meaning and solace, the lack of resolution Dell has always felt runs to the very last page of the book. His choice to teach Thomas Hardy's novels, the final and important symbol of the book, attests to the bleak life he has experienced but also endured, unlike Hardy's protagonists. Berner's renaming herself after her father suggests an attempt at her own reunion with her father whose presence or absence remains mysterious. Her jokey observations as they talk at Applebee's resemble Dell's philosophical musings, though she expresses them much more ironically. "One suicide's enough for a family of four," she quips (411), and while at lunch, Berner demands Dell be honest with her "or I'll come back and haunt you," (410). Her ability to laugh at her impending death suggests that she has perhaps found her own peace, and it anticipates the line from Neeva's chronicle that Dell reads after Berner dies: "I think…when you're dying, you probably want it. You don't fight it. It's like dreaming. It's good" (417).

Despite all of this death that literally has surrounded Dell his entire life, he has cultivated a tolerance or an acceptance of the pain that constitutes one's existence. He feels he will have to pay on some level for burying the bodies of Jepps and Crosley, but he did not kill them. Dell's final take on his life makes good solid sense, but it also acknowledges that the violent and dark episodes that have punctuated his life have also contributed to this somewhat arbitrary final assessment: "You have a better chance in life—of surviving it—if you tolerate loss well; manage not to be a cynic through it all…to connect the unequal things into a whole that preserves the good, even if admittedly good is often not simple to find. We try, as my sister said. We try. All of us. We try" (418).

Discussion Question 1

What does the job Dell has say about him?

Discussion Question 2

Is it surprising that Dell gets married? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 3

What does Berner's death mean in terms of the entire novel?

Vocabulary

finite, conceit, forsaken, vengeful, undulant, revelatory, elliptical, raspy, hawkish, nondescript

Characters

Dell Parsons

The narrator of the novel, Dell is a 66 year-old English teacher living in Windsor, Ontario at the time of the telling of his story. He recalls his youth during the year 1960 when he was 15. A naval brat, he has moved about and is curious about his world. He lingers over his parents' troubled relationship, since their initial sexual encounter resulted in the birth of himself and his fraternal twin, Berner. Dell's biggest fear is that his wayward life will prevent him from attending school, and his self-education consists of consulting his World Book Encyclopedia on various subjects that interest him. He teaches himself to play chess, wants to learn beekeeping since its ordered world appeals to him, and he looks forward to attending high school during the summer of 1960.

Dell is prevented from doing so after his parents rob a bank to pay an outstanding debt that results from his father's involvement in a penny-ante scheme, and before they go to jail, his mother arranges for a family friend to take him to Canada. He removes to Canada to live with Arthur Remlinger, for whom he works assisting geese hunters who travel from America, and cleans rooms at the seedy hotel, the Leonard, Arthur owns. He also works and fears Charley Quarters, a violent man who nonetheless teaches Dell some important lessons about growing up in the volatile world in which he finds himself. He respects but is puzzled by Arthur, whom he learns is a fugitive from justice. Arthur decides to make Dell his "special son," which means that he inadvertently becomes involved in the murder of two Americans who have come to confront Arthur.

After the murders, Dell moves to Winnipeg to attend high school, then college. He ends up teaching English and marries a Canadian woman named Clare. His marriage remains childless, and he reunites with his sister Berner who is dying of cancer. He retires from teaching and lives a somewhat contented life, but his involvement with the murders haunts him, and he still thinks on some level that he still has to account for it since he helped bury the bodies of the two murdered Americans. At the end of the novel he muses about the vagaries of life, but concludes that life is all about trying to get through it, and that has to be enough for everyone.

Arthur Remlinger

One of the most significant characters in the novel, Arthur is an American raised in a stable family who attended Harvard but did not graduate because he could no longer pay the tuition, and his professors refuse to give him a scholarship partially because of his reactionary political views. He moves to upstate New York where he joins a group of like-minded individuals how persuade him to drive to Detroit and leave a car bomb behind a union hall that kills a union leader. He flees the United States and becomes a fugitive of justice in Saskatchewan where he finds sponsorship by a German who sympathizes with him politically. He lives in the junky shack in Partreau and eventually

inherits the Leonard from the German where he hosts nomadic workers and Americans who arrive in the season to shoot geese.

Dell first meets Arthur after his sister, Mildred, drives him to stay with him. Arthur strikes Dell as a sophisticated but off-putting person who fascinates but puzzles Dell. Arthur doesn't engage with Dell at first but gradually grooms him into a surrogate son. Although educated and philosophical, Arthur is a violent, cynical, and self-righteous man with undertones of condescension and superiority that he employs to justify his actions. He employs this pretension and pomposity to compensate for the ruined life he constantly bemoans.

Arthur grows closer to Dell to involve him in the murder of the two Americans who have finally arrives seeking justice of some kind for the car bombing in Detroit. He murders the two Americans in the junky shack where he originally lived and has Dell help to bury the bodies in the fields where the Americans shoot geese. Arthur remains justified and aloof about his criminal past to the very end, and he never is held responsible for the murders he has committed. The novel never accounts for Arthur's whereabouts after Dell leaves for Winnipeg, and his outcome remains unknown.

Bev Parsons

Bev Parsons is married to Neeva Parsons and is the father of Dell and his twin sister Berner. He is a bombardier for the Navy but receives an honorable discharge after he is involved in a scheme to slaughter high-quality cattle and sell the meat. He bounces around from job to job but tries to support his family and achieve the long-sought-after but elusive American dream of suburban stability. His good looks, Southern charm, and easy-going personality endear him to people, and these traits contribute to his ability to sell cars or ranches.

Once the meat-selling scheme goes bad, Bev finds himself in debt to a man who threatens him and his family. Because of this situation, he and his wife decide to rob a bank to repay the money and to improve their circumstances overall. He robs a bank in North Dakota, but the high drama of the crime is deflated once the bank employees and patrons remain underwhelmed by his performance and they tell him he will be caught. Bev and his wife are eventually caught and jailed. When Dell and Berner visit him in prison, he is irritable, distracted, and frenetic. After he is supposedly released, his whereabouts are never disclosed.

Neeva Parsons

The daughter of Jewish parents who escaped war-torn Europe after the First World War, Neeva graduated from college at the age of 18 and is a frustrated intellectual and teacher. She defies her parents wish for a stable and quiet life for her, and they disapprove of her marriage to Bev that she entered after a single sexual encounter that results in the birth of the twins. She speaks French, quotes poetry, and fancies herself a

writer. She disparages what she calls “middle-brow tastes” in general as well as the hinterlands she finds herself in as her husband is relocated from base to base.

Neeva agrees to rob the North Dakota bank with her husband and drives the getaway car. When the police come to arrest her, she snaps at them and is taken away. When Dell and Berner visit their mother in prison, she tries to act as if she is fine, but the experience breaks her. In prison, she writes “A Chronicle of a Crime Committed by a Weak-Minded Person,” which sums up what, to her, has been a wasted life, though she peppers it with tones of hope and moments of brilliance. She commits suicide while still in prison.

Berner Parsons

Berner is Dell’s fraternal twin who resembles her mother in her moody and thoughtful ways. She stays quietly in her room, is conscious of her uneven looks, and reads scandalous novels such as Peyton Place by Grace Metalious and Bonjour Tristesse by Françoise Sagan. As twins, Berner and Dell get along mostly, but she can be sarcastic and dismissive toward him at times. She also figures as one of the more sexual characters in the book since she has sex with her boyfriend Rudy and initiates an incestuous relationship with her brother. Her parents’ decision to rob a bank hurts and confuses her, but she displays an independent streak by refusing to have Mildred drive her with Dell to Canada. She runs off to San Francisco to meet and stay with Rudy and his mother, but he never shows up. She lives an unsettled life as first a hippie, goes through a series of menial jobs and multiple husbands, and ends up dying of cancer. Before she dies, Berner and Dell meet for a bittersweet reunion but her life, for the most part, has been a difficult and unsatisfying one though she ultimately has shown that, in her ability to adapt to her varied environments, she has been a survivor.

Charley Quarters

Charley works for Arthur helping the visiting Americans shoot geese. He despises his boss who has some secret knowledge of him in store for blackmail. Charley is volatile and violent, and also possesses an ambiguous sexuality as he exhibits a mild transvestitism with his dyed hair, lipstick and rouge. Dell fears him but, in his own inadvertent and threatening way, teaches Dell some important lessons about how to take care of himself as he matures. Charley helps Dell bury the two Americans whom Arthur kills and after Dell leaves, he is never heard from again.

Florence La Blanc

Florence is Arthur’s woman friend/lover, whom she originally met after being abandoned by boyfriend in a bar. She has been previously married, has a son named Roland in Winnipeg, and evinces a weary wisdom about the events of her life. Florence is artistic, paints landscapes influenced by the Nighthawk School, and cares for Dell as much as she can. Her compassion and kindness contrast with Arthur’s violence, and she

eventually arranges for Dell to live with her son so he can attend high school and commence a normal life.

Rudy Patterson

Rudy is Berner's boyfriend and slightly older than Dell. He's a troublemaker whose parents want nothing to do with him, and he exhibits a masculinity and sexual aggression that fascinates Dell. Rudy agrees to run off to San Francisco with Berner after her parents go to jail but he never shows up.

Mildred Remlinger

Mildred Remlinger is a school nurse and friend to Neeva. She agrees to drive Dell to Saskatchewan so that he may elude the juvenile system (at his mother's request) and live with her brother Arthur. Despite her participation in hiding Dell from the authorities, she is a loyal friend who dispenses good advice to Dell after she drops him off and returns to the States.

Raymond Jepps

Raymond Jepps is a somewhat bumbling American from Detroit who takes it upon himself, along with Louis Crosley, to interrogate Arthur about the car bombing. He is a former policeman who strikes Dell as foolish because of his toupee, round body, and clown-like shoes. Arthur murders him because he has arrived to enact some sort of justice for the bombing and is buried in the fields where the men hunt geese.

Louis Crosley

Louis Crosley arrives with Jepps to confront Arthur about his crime. He is younger and better looking than Jepps, and he appears a bit more alert and perceptive. Arthur also shoots him, and he is buried along with Jepps in the fields where the men shoot geese. Two of Arthur's henchmen drive the Americans' car to a motel in Montana, check in as Jepps and Crosley, and then abandon it before returning to Canada. Dell speculates that if the authorities ever investigated their disappearance, it would have been long after he arrived in Winnipeg because of a lack of evidence.

Clare Parsons

A late-comer to the novel, Clare is Dell's wife. She has a stabilizing influence on her husband as she permits him the freedom to continue to make sense of his uneven past. Clare is also the only person Dell tells about the murders. Although she marries Dell, the couple remains childless.

Symbols and Symbolism

Bird Imagery: Geese and Pheasants

The bird imagery of pheasants and geese symbolizes the cruelty and violence of characters who either exploit or kill these beautiful animals.

In Canada, Richard Ford punctuates the novel with episodes of violence that trade in this kind of bird imagery. When Arthur first takes Dell “under his wing” in order to educate and groom him, he drives his car 90 miles per hour through six pecking and inoffensive pheasants. This cruel act of animal abuse astonishes Dell, and he disturbingly recounts how “one [of the pheasants] struck the windshield, two catapulted into the air, a fourth and fifth were transformed into feathers on the highway, a sixth was untouched, barely noticing the car passing” (310). Dell’s patient and compassionate account of the outcome of all six pheasants contrasts with Arthur’s dismissive and emotionless reaction to their maiming.

The hotel that Arthur owns and where many American geese hunters come to stay during the season also contributes to the decimation of geese. Striking but sturdy and aggressive animals, the geese don’t stand much of a chance against American rifles and Charley Quarters’ decoys and methods of mimicking their call to attract them. Dell must participate in this slaughter as part of his job, and while some may minimize the behavior of hunters as playing a harmless sport and providing food, Dell at one point mentions how the ground is covered with dead or dying geese. Charley and he do pluck them and freeze the meat for later use, but the carnage ultimately strikes a sensitive observer as unnecessary, useless, and cruel. One need only recall the faceless hunters who kill Bambi’s mother in the Walt Disney film to comprehend a similar and comparative violence.

Decay of Partreau

The decay of Partreau symbolizes both historical loss tinged with a sense of furture hope.

The town of Partreau generally functions as an overdetermined symbol in the novel in the sense that multiple and sometimes conflicting meanings layer it. Arthur first inhabits the junky shack that Dell lives in after he flees Detroit, and his personal effects flood the place. Dell finds his living situation intolerable, and he grudgingly returns to it each evening to eat a cold dinner under an oppressive fluorescent bulb. He also lives next to the violent Charley, with whom he shares a dirty privy. Dell fears being almost sexually assaulted by Charley while “on the throne” (his father’s expression, of course) and he jerry-rigs the door with some wire to prevent Charley’s entry. But Dell tries to convert his lodgings into something livable, and he even manages to find some beauty and interest in this wreck of a town. Although hardly an interior decoration, Dell buys a lavender

candle to eliminate odors and promote his falling to sleep. When he decides to take a personal tour of Partreau, which is characteristic of him as a curious and intelligent youth trying to make the best of his circumstances, he initially believes he will find nothing but despair.

Partreau does not disappoint as Dell wanders among the shadow of existence in its abandoned houses, stores and bank, and the detritus of lost pleasures in the abandoned carnival equipment. He surprises himself, however, with the revelation that he does not finally view his surroundings as an ossified and boring museum full of useless relics that no longer interest the historian or even archaeologist. “This state of mind,” he says, “conferred another freedom on me and was like starting life over, or… becoming someone else—but someone who was not stalled but moving, which was the nature of things in the world” (253). As a purgatory-like space, Partreau figures in the novel as a halfway point situated along the continuum of bad to good, and Dell realizes he is finally on his way to a new life, whatever it may hold.

Charley Quarter's Cosmetic Case

Charley’s cosmetic case symbolizes confused and hidden human sexuality in the novel.

His case, or “box” as Dell describes it, also is a fleeting symbol, since Dell sees it only once. The case carries much wider thematic concerns, however, despite its ephemeral appearance. First, it signifies a hidden life Charley possibly leads. Dell fears Charley’s hyper-masculinity and his stocky and powerful yet grotesque and dwarf-like appearance. On one outing with him, however, Dell notices that Charley wears lipstick and rouge and dyes his hair, which he fastens with a woman’s barrette, to look black. This transvestite or trans-gender-like behavior feminizes Charley, but it doesn’t seem to soften his behavior. He remains bent on killing coyotes, hating Arthur, and terrifying Dell. The exact nature of his sexuality remains ambiguous throughout the novel. At one point he mentions to Dell that Mildred Remlinger wanted to have sex with him, and he taunts Dell with the possibility that the older man who plans on staying with Dell in the shack (which Florence circumvents by having Dell move into the Leonard) will get drunk and make sexual advances. Dell also notices that Charley doesn’t wear makeup around the geese hunters, but his decision to do so in the presence of Dell might indicate a level of comfort around Dell that permits Charley to be himself, or maybe he simply doesn’t care what Dell thinks.

When Dell first arrives in Partreau, Charley exposes his penis to him as he urinates in the glare of the truck’s headlights, yet he also advises Dell with the heteronormative recommendation not to “let anybody do you that way, though [i.e. just fuck]. You wait on some nice girl. I got things shown too early. And here I am” (226-227). Whatever happened to Charley also remains as ambiguous as his sexuality, but most likely he was sexually abused as a child. Additionally, Charley also mentions to Dell that Arthur has some salacious information about Charley that could be used against him. Perhaps Charley is a child molester as well. But, like so many other issues, the novel forecloses on any further elucidation. In the end, and despite its brief appearance, Charley’s

cosmetic case functions as a Pandora's box that unleashes variations upon twisted, cryptic, and threatening aspects of human sexuality that dominate the novel's thematic concerns.

Paintings: Their Fight to the Death

Like the bird imagery, the paintings in Canada symbolize a kind of ambivalent beauty among violence.

In the bar at the Leonard hangs a "large oil painting of two bull moose locked in combat, their antlers tangled in a way they'd never escape" title Their Fight to the Death that Dell admires (351). The most traditional literary symbol in the novel, this painting's meaning is obvious in its depiction of futile conflict. Since their antlers are entangled indefinitely, neither moose can advance to victory or defeat, and the painting captures this moment for the viewer who must stay locked in anticipation. Though a kind of still-life, the picture possesses an implicit movement that fascinates Dell, who later admits he could stare at it for hours, and it signifies the verge of a violent outcome that never materializes. Their Fight to the Death thus illustrates the potential for violence that surrounds Dell but, in his case, he experiences its deadly resolution.

Paintings: Florence La Blanc's Landscapes

Florence's landscapes of Partreau, which puzzle Dell, symbolize beauty among the most unlikely of settings.

A devotee of the Nighthawk school (as Arthur says), Florence seems to be influenced by Edward Hopper's painting Nighthawks, the very famous American painting of isolated figures in an urban diner that plays with shading and light and falls somewhat in the tradition of Impressionist painters such as Claude Monet, who also experimented with the way sunlight alters appearances of the same subject. Given this influence, then, Florene finds beauty in what Dells perceives as a vast wasteland of frustrated and forgotten hopes: "I couldn't see why this would be a subject for a painting," he says, "since it was right there for anybody to see any time, and wasn't beautiful—nothing like Niagra Falls in the Frederic Church picture, or the flower arrangements my father painted with his numbers kit" (291).

Niagra Falls in the Church picture is really a jigsaw puzzle and the paint-by-number flower arrangements represent bourgeois (or as Dell's mother would say "middlebrow") artistic taste, and are akin to the way calendars and coffee mugs recycle great artistic works by Impressionistic painters such as Pierre-Aguste Renoir and Vincent Van Gogh for middle-class viewers. After studying Florence's painting, Dell admits that he likes it even if he doesn't understand it, so both the moose painting and Florence's landscapes permit Dell an understanding of the extremes of violence and beauty that make up his immediate environment.

Arthur Remlinger's Silver Pistol

The murder weapon Arthur uses to shoot Jepps and Crosely, Arthur's gun symbolizes manly and phallic power, but Dell's observation of it as a "lady's gun" because of its low caliber also feminizes it.

This feminization of the pistol diminishes Arthur's masculine power in contrast to the rifles of the geese hunters or even Charley's gun he uses to shoot the coyote. For, despite Charley's makeup wearing, he still embodies an intimidating manliness. Dell first finds the silver pistol while cleaning Arthur's small suite of rooms, and it mesmerizes him: "I held the muzzle to my nose in a way I'd seen also seen in the movies. It smelled like hard metal and the spicy oil used to clean it. The little barrel was slick and shiny. I sighted it out the window at the CP yard, at the rails full of grain sitting in the sun" (269).

Although Dell's father had a pistol used in the bank robbery, it had been issued by the Air Force and never struck Dell as exceptional. Dell's only understanding of what one does with a gun has come from the movies, and his sensuous treatment of looking at, touching, and smelling it attests to his unfamiliarity with such a weapon. He becomes suddenly afraid and concludes the gun to be "a very definite and dangerous thing" (269-270), and quickly puts it away for fear of being caught. The pistol thus hints at Arthur's dangerous past that Charley unfolds to Dell, and it also functions as a practical prop used to murder the two Americans.

Fake Bonnie and Clyde Car

The fake Bonnie and Clyde car Dell and his father see outside the movie theater in Biloxi, Mississippi symbolizes and foreshadows the unfortunate outcome of his father's future crime, since his and Neeva's fate share many similarities with the Bonnie and Clyde story.

The car conveniently appears after the theater has shown old newsreels from the 1930s that feature the death of Bonnie and Clyde, but Dell sees it on a Saturday in 1955. The carnival-barking-like sign that accompanies it promises $10,000 to anyone who can prove it is not real, even though moviegoers must pay 50 cents first in order to inspect it. Dell's father calls it a "fakeroo" given his knowledge of ballistics and says the bullet holes didn't look real, plus the fact that the car has been freshly painted. The car carries wider significance in that it parallels the robbery that Dell's parents commit, since they are about the same age as Bonnie and Clyde when killed, and the amount of $10,000 (which the theater owner most certainly doesn't have) is the same amount that Bev wants to steal from the bank in North Dakota. The car's spuriousness demonstrates that it is a gimmicky ruse to make more money from the theatergoers that Bev refuses to pay.

Dell's memory of this car years later also illustrates his conviction that his father was somehow born to rob banks. He asks Dell if he ever thought about robbing a bank and Dell says no. "I could give it a try," Bev says. 'I'd be smarter than these two though. …

Your mother'd take this wrong, of course. You don't need to relate it to her" (83). Bev demonstrates his own deception when he tells Dell to keep his mouth shut.

Neeva Parson's Writing: A Chronicle of a Crime Committed by a Weak Person

Neeva's chronicle symbolizes a past filled with regret but punctuated by a quiet hope.

A frustrated and artistic person, Neeva has written poetry that she someday wishes to publish, and the chronicle that she writes before committing suicide in prison also reflects its own interest and beauty. When Dell sees his mother in prison, she describes the genre she will write in is a tragi-comedy, and this description mimics the tragic comedies of Shakespeare such as The Winter's Tale which begin badly but end happily. Berner gives Dell the chronicle that Mildred Remlinger has sent her, and its own makeshift appearance betrays Neeva's attempts to create an aesthetic sense out of her personal chaos. Written in faded ink, the chronicle consists of a "sheaf of white notebook pages that were dry and hole-punched and tied together with what looked like stiffened bits of shoelace" (413). Berner had been hesitant to mail it to him and wanted to give it to him in person, and it contains some pathetic but poetic last thoughts: "Through what crime. Through what fault have I deserved my weakness now," she writes (413-414). The chronicle is a kind of literary last will and testament that Dell reads over the years that makes him cry and is the only vestige of his mother's life in his possession.

The act of writing liberates Neeva, however, as in the excerpt written in the spring of 1961 that Berner checked with a pencil: "Right now I feel good. A weight's off of me. Some great weight. Nature does not abhor a vacuum, it turns out" (417). Nature not abhorring a vacuum means that Neeva can find solace in an existential nothingness, for the philosophy of existentialism, with its concessions to the irrational, also implies making sense out of one's life. Dell's supposition that Neeva wanted to publish it also indicates a feeling of hope, that maybe someday, once released from prison, she can begin her life anew.

Money Stolen from Agricultural National Bank

The stolen money symbolizes an attempt to achieve the American Dream at any cost.

Dell finds the money his parents have stolen behind the back seat of his father's car after his parents go to jail and decides to hide it. What remains of the $2500 is still wrapped in the Agricultural National Bank money sleeve, which Dell claims "meant nothing to me" (162). Bev gets away with relatively little in comparison to the $10,000 he wants to steal so that he can facilitate the American Dream for himself and his family. But since this money is ill-gotten, it symbolically isn't worth the paper it's printed upon. At some point Dell and Berner split the money, but she never spends it and Dell doesn't

seem to take his half to Canada. One wonders if, in the end, the bank robbery truly was “worth” it.

Dell's Hobbies: Chess

Dell's passion for chess implies the security of a predictable outcome (somebody always wins and the other always loses) that nonetheless requires strategy to navigate and logic to win. The game also permits him to bond with other peers and, for a short while, assists him to live like a normal teenager.

Dell's Hobbies: The World Book Encyclopedia

Dell’s hobbies symbolize his potential for personal and academic growth in the novel that becomes somewhat stunted. Dell's interest in chess also exposes him to great chess masters from Russia that he looks up in his encyclopedia that he constantly consults in order to expand his knowledge. He also uses the encyclopedia, among other books, to learn beekeeping.

Dell's Hobbies: Beekeeping

Dell's experiences in Canada break his intellectual spirit, and after living with people like Arthur and Charley he, on some level, no longer has any hope that he will inhabit a happy and productive communal-like place of structure and order.

The beehive represents another stable community where all the bees instinctively know what to do. A queen reigns while drones do their job and produce a sweet and delightful product in the form of honey. Dell ironically abandons beekeeping even though he finds some empty boxes that house the bees in Partreau.

Victorian Poet and Novelist Thomas Hardy (1840-1928)

Thomas Hardy symbolizes the bleakness of life that Dell carries with him as he becomes an adult.

He mentions Hardy only fleetingly, but his writing influences Dell and the novel as a whole. Hardy ranks among other great Victorian poets such as Alfred, Lord Tennyson and Robert Browning. Like much Victorian literature written during the tumultuous nineteenth century, Hardy’s poetry explores the dark side of simple people’s lives. This tendency toward bleakness also manifests in his novels, most notably in Tess of the D’Urvervilles (1891) and Jude the Obscure (1895). Dell fancies Hardy’s novel from 1886 titled The Mayor of Casterbridge.

The novel is about a successful business man of many secrets whose cruelty and deception ultimately ruin him. The main character leaves note instructing that he be

buried in unconsecrated ground with no recognition of his life or death. The novel haunts Dell, and he teaches it to his students. It prompts him to ask them “Do you ever have the odd feeling that you’ve somehow escaped punishment?” (416). His students’ perplexity reveals that he is talking about himself, but Hardy also permits him to teach them to step outside themselves and take on other people’s views instead of selfishly asking “I don’t see what this has to do with us”: “Does everything have to be about you?” Dell responds (396). Like his mother, Dell sees the difficulty that constitutes life in Hardy’s work, but poets and novelists write to show how we can all make sense of our painful experiences, and that we are, perhaps in some small way, better human beings for it.

Settings

Great Falls, Montana

Although a real place, author Richard Ford “takes liberties with the townscape of Great Falls” (prefatory material). Dell’s father is stationed there at the naval base and they live on the margins of town life since the natives distrust the nomadic lives of the naval families who come and go. Dell’s mother dismisses it as provincial and backward and urges her children not to assimilate with their surroundings. Good-natured Dell, however, explores his surroundings and appreciates its raw and natural Northwestern beauty. He looks forward to starting high school, joins the chess club, and wants to take up beekeeping. He finally feels as if he has found a home, but he is once again uprooted once he moves to Canada.

Creekmore, North Dakota

Dell’s parents drive to Creekmore in western North Dakota to rob the Agricultural National Bank. Creekmore typifies the small prairie towns of the upper Mid-West, and Bev believes its status as a kind of backwater will guarantee his anonymity. But since Creekmore’s citizens notice everything out of the ordinary because of its tiny size and location, the town represents the scene of the crime that will land Bev and Neeva in prison.

Partreau and Fort Royal, Saskatchewan

Partreau and Fort Royal function as rather desolate places where Dell lives with Arthur Remlinger. Dell first lives in a junky shack in Partreau before moving to the Leonard in Fort Royal. Dell likes Fort Royal better than Partreau, which reflects a once-lived and live-able past now in serious decay. Dell comes to appreciate the ruinous beauty of Partreau, and, among its surroundings, begins to lead the semblance of a more solid life. Once he moves to the Leonard, he explores the town’s downtown, with its abandoned library and drug store, and works in the surrounding fields with the geese hunters.

Dell moves to Winnipeg shortly after the murders and returns years later with his wife. He finds Partreau even a more non-extant wreck, and Fort Royal has also suffered near obliteration. The point seems to be that whatever towns existed, they are no longer is relevant. This irrelevancy, of course, mirrors the fact that Dell has long since had nothing to do with these places, and that, perhaps, his dubious and violent past can also be forgotten.

Detroit, Michigan

Detroit's significance as the scene of Arthur's crime and the home of Jepps and Crosley haunts Dell in his later years. Detroit also represents the seat of the American Dream, since during the heyday of the car industry, workers earned a good salary, had benefits, and earned a pension with which they could retire comfortably. Arthur Remlinger sacrifices any potential success he could have earned while living in Detroit. His decision to leave the car bomb forces him to remove to Canada to evade the American legal system.

Twin Cities, Minnesota

The Twin Cities where Berner now lives and where she dies represents the location of his reunion with his twin sister, and the place of a mild resolution with his only remaining family member. The fact that these fraternal twins reunite in the Twin Cities is ironic, but it reinforces the connection that Dell and Berner have. In the end, the two siblings achieve a final resolution that helps them move on, whether Berner in death and Dell in life.

The Year 1960

Most of the events of the novel occur during the year 1960. Americans are beginning to shed the cocoon of the (so-called) security of the 1950s, when many people craved and created the stability of life in the suburbs and a close-knit nuclear family that opposed the poverty of the Great Depression of the 1930s and the war years of the 1940s. While many of the rebellions and revolutions have yet to ignite (women's rights, gay rights, countercultural attitudes toward drugs and sex, communal living, draft dodgers), the novel's violence anticipates much of the disorder and discontent that also coincides with the Vietnam War.

Themes and Motifs

Canada as a Novel of Development or Coming-of-Age Story

Dell eventually becomes a high school English teacher, and the books that he teaches his students (such as The Mayor of Casterbridge by Thomas Hardy, The Great Gatsby by F. Scott Fitzgerald, and The Nick Adams Stories by Ernest Hemingway) all feature young men coming of age and whose plights echo Dell's own adolescence, and he recycles them for himself and his students in a continuous attempt to understand his own riddled past. Dell's own experiences, violent though they may be, nonetheless sculpt him into the sensitive and thoughtful man he becomes as an adult.

While all adolescents experience troubling times, personal insecurities, and outside threats, Dell in no way enjoys the usual and familiar trappings of teenage years. Rather than attending high school, hanging out with peers, going to the prom, and having a minimum wage job, Dell must confront the fact that his parents robbed a bank. Their crime upends his life completely, and this episode affects him on a very deep level since he possesses such passion about beginning high school and learning about the world around him. His longing for intellectual understanding and living a life as a normal teenager is especially poignant, given that his sincerity and curiosity contrast with the typical teenager who supposes and assumes that going to high school entails having a good time rather than succeeding academically.

These accidents or circumstances of Dell's life force him to leave his hometown to live in a junky shack, struggle to survive on his own, and become the ward of a domestic terrorist. During his time with the unstable Arthur Remlinger, Dell puzzles his way through the detritus of the town he lives in. As an adolescent trying to comprehend a sexual life and his own sexuality, he confronts the hyper-masculine transvestite Charley Quarters, and is duped into playing the perverse role of "special son" to Arthur who peripherally involves Dell in the murder of two Americans.

Although the novel takes place in the northwest of America during 1960, the setting of the novel reflects the increasingly dangerous world of school shootings and terrorist bombings familiar to young people who are the same age as Dell today. Dell longs for a normal life unavailable to him, and the novel requires him to fast track his life into adulthood. He has no choice but to adapt, adjust, and move on. As a result, Dell gains a wisdom most of his peers do not possess.

The Pursuit of the American Dream

Canada interrogates the American dream to which most of its citizens subscribe in order to demythologize the belief that hard work guarantees higher education, a good paying

job, and an idyllic nuclear family life in the safe confines of suburbia and away from the violence of the city.

Dell's nomadic life as he moves from one Air Force base to another prevents him from making friends and spreading domestic roots that stabilize American families. Instead, Dell adapts everywhere he goes though he longs for a more permanent life, but this adaptability that both he and his twin Berner develop contributes to their own personal strength. This desire to have a suburban home with a white picket fence and backyard stocked with small pets constitutes the American Dream that his father unconsciously tries to provide for his family. The American Dream also implies higher education, a good-paying job, and leisure time for family vacations, which are mostly missing in the book. Although Dell does graduate college, the only other successful example of an educated man is Arthur, though Harvard refused to support him when he could no longer afford the tuition because of his reactionary political views.

Bev's own wish for a more stable life for his family motivates his decision to rob a bank, though this potential option for achieving suburban success is an insane choice. When Dell's parents return from North Dakota, they announce that they plan to buy and fix the house they now rent, so that Dell and Berner finally can enjoy a normal adolescence. This attempt at a kind of American normality is tainted from the start, since the commitment of the crime guarantees life in a prison cell for his parents rather than in a pleasant colonial or ordinary ranch home.

Dell's domestic situation and pseudo-family life in Canada continues as a further perversion of the classic American Dream, since violence pervades his life in Saskatchewan. This distortion of regular, suburban life—impossible to attain in dumpy Partreau and seedy Fort Royal—also partakes of the genre of American Gothic that renders the ordinary elements of life frightening and unfamiliar, as in Wes Craven's movie Nightmare on Elm Street from 1984, in which the children of a gorgeous neighborhood and tree-lined street are murdered for being products of the American Dream. In Canada, Dell has no friends his age, does not attend high school, and associates with shady and murderous people who do not have recognizable and normal lives.

The novel thus ultimately inverts, deflates, or even parodies the American Dream as it removes Dell from the U.S. and forces him to live in another country where many of its inhabitants neither understand nor like Americans and their ways.

The Storytelling of Our Lives

As a literal character in his own story, Dell highlights how knowledge of the self and self-awareness are not fixed categories, since the various situations he finds himself in demonstrate the fluidity of his life and the changing roles he must play. Initially, he is literal son to Bev and Neeva and twin to Berner, but when he moves to Canada he becomes "special son" to Arthur and surrogate son to Florence and her own son.

Dell practices what the American philosopher William James theorized as the possession of many selves in relation to his social context. This philosophical construct can also be interpreted as the self constantly in performance as he “acts” different ways around Mildred, Arthur, Charley and ultimately his wife Clare. Dell complicates this concept even further when he chooses to engage in what he defines as “reverse thinking,” a form of revisionist thought that, in effect, subscribes to the belief that thinking makes it so. As Dell acts as a player on the world’s stage, he implicitly tries to create and determine reality. In other words, if he chooses to believe Jepps and Crosley have only good and not bad intentions when confronting Arthur, then that is what will happen because, according to Dell’s thoughts, Arthur cannot be a murderer since he does not have the word “murderer” written on his face. As a result, Dell does not describe Arthur as a murderer in the program or list of characters that populate the drama that is his life.

Dell, however, realizes the weakness of this train of thought once Arthur starts to evince it. At one point, he says “to say something is founded on a lie isn’t really alleging very much” (369). The concept of Truth (with a capital T) becomes no longer an absolute category, since lies or falsehoods function as a kind of alternative reality for liars and deceivers and those duped by them. Arthur also demonstrates how his own self-invention or reinvention from violent criminal to benign hotelkeeper also embodies this phenomenon. Dell very gradually gets to know Arthur as Mildred feeds him one narrative, Charlie dispenses another, and Mrs. Gedins none at all. The narrative of who Arthur really is remains a deep sub-text difficult to discern and decipher. How he appears to Dell and the rest of the world is determined phenomenologically, in other words what you see (and hear or think you know) is what you get.

Human Sexuality and Heteronormativity

Canada employs the themes of human sexuality and heteronormativity, or, in other words, heteronormativity is the assumption that everyone is heterosexual, and if one says he is married, it is assumed he is married to a woman and not a man. to show how Dell participates, although peripherally, in the countercultural and sexual revolutions of the 1960s that largely inform and influence the person he becomes.

While same-sex marriage is possible today, in the 1960s is was not a way of life accepted or welcomed by the general public. Furthermore, the novel’s setting assumes these oppressive ideas about gender roles that restricted women’s personal and social freedom, and that demonized homosexuals as predatory child molesters. While Bev and Neeva have a traditional marriage, they wed because of one sexual encounter that produced twins, and they seem not to engage in sexual relations any longer. Dell remains convinced throughout the book that they never should have stayed together, let alone married in the first place, and this conviction explodes the myth of the happy straight couple still celebrating their wedding anniversary years later.

Dell’s own sexuality remains ambiguous. He confesses to having no knowledge of sex, and the Filipino girl with whom he associates at the Leonard is more of a pal than

sexual object. One of the wayward girls at the Catholic school, Marjorie, represents a kind of omnivorous and monstrous sexuality as she tells him she wants to make a man or a “mess” out of him, which Dell finds horrifying. Dell’s satisfaction when dancing with Rudy further reaffirms this lack of clarity about his sexuality when Berner tells Rudy to dance with his girlfriend and not his boyfriend. Dell also never expresses any sexual interest in women or men, and while he does have a conventional marriage with Clare, they remain childless. Additionally, the incestuous relationship he has with Berner thwarts the idea of a healthy sexuality even further, and its unorthodoxy renders Dell a silent participant in it.

Dell’s arrival in Canada perpetuates this disruption of traditional gender roles that gnaws away at heteronormative assumptions. Charley Quarters distorts straight male sexuality as he exhibits transvestite, perhaps even trans-gender, behavior even though he looks and acts like an ultra-male with his intimidating strength and public display of urinating. Dell also believes Florence is Arthur’s girlfriend, but she seems to be more of a friend given Arthur’s overall asexuality. The novel, however, provides no resolution to these issues, which is appropriate given how the continuum of human sexuality is increasingly being interrogated nowadays.

The Banality of Evil

As such, Arthur demonstrates how evil can appear and embody itself as a seemingly innocuous person who, at the same time, causes much damage not instantly recognized by others.

The twentieth-century philosopher Hannah Arendt theorized and labeled this behavior of Arthur’s as the "banality of evil" based upon her scrutiny of the Nuremberg trials of Nazi war criminals after World War II. Instead of witnessing prepossessing and horrific men too terrible to lay eyes on, Arendt saw them as uninteresting, dull, pencil-pushing and number-crunching bureaucrats merely "doing their job." To her, they embodied nothing interesting as individuals given the nature of their war crimes. Arthur Remlinger typifies this banality of evil in the novel. Despite his self-importance and pomposity, he is not as brilliant as he thinks. He fails to graduate from Harvard, subscribes to the limited views of the like-minded when living in New York, and believes he should not have to be punished by living in social exile because of the car bomb. After all, he sees himself as superior to everyone, especially the simple Canadians he has encountered. Furthermore, he commits three murders and, within the contours of the novel at least, is never punished for them.

Dell initially thinks Arthur is or must be interesting, but once he gets to know him more, realizes he is nothing but a foolish and frustrated man who takes out his anger on harmless pheasants. Dell’s view of him after this crucial episode is one of astonishment as he instantly revises whom he thought Arthur was. Arthur thus figures as a very small man who has gained a limited measure of power as a result of his megalomaniacal delusions. Arthur represents to Dell what Adolph Eichmann did to Arendt, which was a

stupid, silly, ineffectual, and uninteresting man who fails to follow a moral compass because he believes no one else is.

After the murder of Jepps and Crosley, Arthur makes a fool of himself as he talks down to Jepps' corpse, taunts him like a child, and throws a self-righteous temper tantrum while Jepps clearly cannot hear him. A pretentious man, Arthur picks right up where he left off after the murders and continues to instruct Dell with ridiculous platitudes such as "Sometimes, Dell, you have to cause trouble for things to be clear," and his continuous self-justification in his belief that "we all deserve a second chance." As Dell silently observes in response, "what he said didn't make sense" (389).

Styles

Point of View

The point of view in Canada is first person singular, using terms like "I" or "me," and the narrator of this first person account is Dell. The use of first person provides readers with an immediacy, and it also permits an intimacy with Dell as he tells his difficult story. This intimacy also titillates, since readers feel that Dell's dark, secret past is not an account he shares with many people, since at the end of the novel he says how the only other person he has told about his peripheral role in the murders is his wife Clare. Dell does not even tell Berner before she dies, so the past he has dragged around for so long has affected him deeply.

The novel's point of view also influences the events that Dell relates, the way characters are portrayed, and the conclusions that readers draw. While Dell is not an unreliable narrator, his biases and values shade what we see. Perhaps Arthur Remlinger is not as horrible as Dell makes him out to be. Perhaps he did what he had to do in order to survive. Perhaps others might not think he is the moral monster Dell makes him out to be. Despite this caveat, and despite the role that subjectivity plays for all of us—in other words, our own experiences and worldview also shade how we talk about events and people—Dell's narrative feels rather objective and, in fact, he seems less ready to condemn someone like Arthur less so than most people would.

Excerpts and fragments from Neeva's "Chronicle of a Crime Committed by a Weak Person" intersperse Dell's straightforward story. These short pieces also possess a first-person point of view, and they complement and elaborate upon Dell's account. Neeva is an elegant and thoughtful writer, though the pain and guilt she feels for having robbed a bank with her husband are apparent. The use of this point of view also lends and intimacy with the reader, but they convey a frustrated passion unlike Dell's much quieter take on events.

By the novel's end, readers have experienced a whirlwind of a story, and Dell's and Neeva's willingness to be honest and vulnerable permits a believable but shocking account of the life of one ordinary upper-Midwest family. The privacy of his life that Dell exposes also has a kind of didactic quality to it in the sense that the novel teaches a lesson: if Dell can endure and thrive (mostly) after all he has been through, it is possible for others to develop strength and be a survivor.

Language and Meaning

The prose style of Canada as narrated by Dell is simple and straightforward. Although he is an English teacher, Dell does not dazzle us intellectually, and the novel plods along as its horrific story unfolds. The very beginning of the novel typifies the writing throughout the book: "First, I'll tell about the robbery out parents committed" (3). This

cryptic opening intrigues readers, and, as stated above, even though the novel consists of the first-person point of view, Dell's use of "our" here includes his sister Berner, and it's an unusual instance of this pronoun in the book. Dell might also phrase it this way to include all readers as well. In other words, Dell takes "us" on "our" journey as we join him to reach its startling outcome.

The last line of the novel mirrors this use of first-person plural pronouns as well: "We try, as my sister said. We try. All of us. We try" (418). "We" have all reached the book's conclusion, and these very simple sentences that consist solely of a subject and a verb, and a sentence fragment in the case of "all of us," illustrate the deadened tone of the whole book. Dell's muted way of telling the story reflects the numbness he feels because his parents have robbed a bank, because he has been forcibly removed to Canada, and because he has been unwittingly involved in the murder of two Americans. He has been through a lot, and his speech reflects the fact that probably nothing surprises or shocks him anymore. His calm temperament and verbal patterns attest to the resigned philosopher that he has, by necessity, become.

Despite the simple sentence structure that constitutes the book, Dell's allusions to literary figures such as the Victorian critic John Ruskin, Thomas Hardy, Ernest Hemingway and F. Scott Fitzgerald demonstrate how this stylistic simplicity is not synonymous with stupidity. Hemingway, for example, is the master of the simple prose style, whereas Dell elucidates Ruskin's complexity: "You have a better chance in life—of surviving it—if you tolerate loss well…to subordinate, as Ruskin implied, to keep proportion, to connect the unequal things into a whole that preserves the good, even if admittedly good is often not simple to find" (418). Dell conflates the brilliance of Ruskin with this remarkable perception about good as a rarity in the world, and his straightforward translation of Ruskin's proportional concept reveals the genius among the ordinary.

Dell does use more figurative language at times, and his extended metaphors and similes appear all the more striking given that he usually does not indulge in them. For example, his description of his parents' ill-fated marriage is "like a long proof in mathematics in which the first calculation is wrong, following which all other calculations move you further away from how things were when they made sense" (7). This simile is almost like a Metaphysical conceit, in which two very disparate objects are equated with one another, as in the famous comparison of two separated lovers to a geometric compass by the poet John Donne. Dell's use of language does end up dazzling us after all, even though its initial curt clarity suggests otherwise.

Structure

Canada is divided into three unequal parts with Part One being the longest. Consisting of Chapters 1-38, the first part introduces the novel with detailed backgrounds of Dell's family. After this lengthy exposition, the book tracks the events leading up to Bev's and Neeva's decision to rob a bank in North Dakota. After this crime, subsequent chapters trace the arrest of Dell's parents and the aftermath of Dell and Berner.

Part Two is the second longest part of the book and is comprised of Chapters 39-67. These chapters begin with Dell's removal to Canada after Berner runs away to San Francisco. This second part includes Dell's living in Partreau, working with Charley Quarters, his encounters with Arthur Remlinger as well as his peripheral role in the murders of Jepps and Crosley. Part Two ends as Dell moves to Winnipeg to live with Florence La Blanc's son so he can begin high school and recommence somewhat of a normal life.

Part Three is the shortest section and contains only Chapters 68 and 69. These treat the contemporary Dell as an English teacher on the verge of retirement. We learn that Dell has remained in Canada and gone to college. He teaches high school English and has married Clare. This part also features his reunion with his dying sister, Berner, and ends on a tenuous note. Although Dell has found some peace, a spiritual uneasiness lingers in his soul.

More than 400 pages, Canada is structured as a standard novel with rather short chapters in Parts One and Two. This structure permits a quick read with lots of white space between chapters and sections. This white space contributes to the jagged and fleeting sense of Dell's life, especially since the setting of the first two sections covers only a few months during the latter half of 1960. Longer chapters appear in Part Three after Dell has found some stability, and their length reflects this uneasy contentment with life he experiences.

Quotes

First, I'll tell about the robbery our parents committed. Then about the murders, which happened later.
-- Dell (chapter 1)

Importance: This line is the dramatic opening to the novel that really sparks an interest in reading the book.

Nothing can be sole or whole that has not been rent.
-- Dell (chapter 5)

Importance: Dell quotes this line from the poem "Crazy Jane Talks to the Bishop" by William Butler Yeats and it exemplifies the way he perceives his flawed parents.

...I've seen the remnants of who they almost succeeded in being but failed to be, before becoming themselves. It's a theory of destiny and character I don't like or want to believe in.
-- Dell (chapter 11)

Importance: This description of homeless men by Dell typifies what he thinks about his father, which is both touching and pathetic given how much he admired him.

You’re life’s going to be a lot of exciting ways before you’re dead. So just pay attention to the present. Don’t rule parts out, and be sure you’ve always got something you don’t mind losing. That’s important.
-- Mildred (chapter 44)

Importance: This quotation is an example of the good advice Mildred gives Dell as she drops him off in Canada.

I've discovered a brand-new coldness in me now. It's not bad to find a cold place in your heart. Artists do this. Maybe it has other names....Strength? Intelligence?"
-- Neeva (chapter 44)

Importance: This line from Neeva's chronicle shows her attempt at being strong while in prison but she soon despairs and commits suicide.

This state of mind conferred another freedom on me and was like starting life over...or becoming someone else--but someone who was not stalled but moving, which was the nature of things in the world. I could like it or hate it, but the world would change around me no matter how I felt.
-- Dell (chapter 45)

Importance: This quotation demonstrates Dell's adaptability, and despite his harsh

surroundings in Canada, he matures and remains level-headed given the instability of his young life.

He needed me to be his 'special son'.... He needed me to do what sons do for their fathers: bear witness that they're substantial, that they're not hollow, not ringing absences. That they count for something when little else seems to.
-- Dell (chapter 55)

Importance: Dell says this about his relationship with Arthur, and it illustrates what Dell realizes he is being used by Arthur for complex purposes.

It's hard to go through life without killing someone.
-- Charley (chapter 61)

Importance: This quotation illustrates Charley's violent tendencies and how Dell has increasingly come to inhabit a volatile and dangerous world.

...I'd come to think that what mattered more (this was my child's protected belief) was how you felt about things; what you assumed; what you thought and feared and remembered. That was what life mostly was to me--events that went on in my brain.
-- Dell (chapter 63)

Importance: This quotation typifies Dell's way of thinking about the world as a narrative that plays out in memory and mentality rather than the physical and tangible events that happen to one.

Now, then. Now, that's settled, isn't it? Once and for all.
-- Arthur (chapter 65)

Importance: These are the words that Dell imagines Arthur is saying to him as he views the murders from a distance. They represent how crazed and vengeful Arthur Remlinger is.

Put all these elements together and you'll make as much sense as can be made."
-- Dell (chapter 66)

Importance: This quotation embodies Dell's sense of the murder of the two Americans--it makes no sense, in effect, and he is left quietly baffled.

You have a better chance in life—of surviving it—if you tolerate loss well; manage not to be a cynic through it all..to connect the unequal things into a whole that preserves the good, even if admittedly good is often not simple to find. We try, as my sister said. We try. All of us. We try."
-- Dell (chapter 69)

Importance: This quotation illustrates the conclusion Dell has come to when he is much older. It also echoes the last words Berner tells him.