

Crooked Letter, Crooked Letter Study Guide

Crooked Letter, Crooked Letter by Tom Franklin

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Contents

Crooked Letter, Crooked Letter Study Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Plot Summary.....	3
Chapters 1 - 2.....	5
Chapters 3 - 4.....	8
Chapter 5.....	11
Chapter 6.....	13
Chapter 7.....	15
Chapter 8.....	17
Chapter 9.....	20
Chapters 10 - 11.....	22
Chapters 12 - 13.....	25
Chapters 14 - 16.....	28
Chapters 17 - 19.....	31
Characters.....	34
Symbols and Symbolism.....	38
Settings.....	40
Themes and Motifs.....	41
Styles.....	45
Quotes.....	48



Plot Summary

The novel, set in the Southern United States, begins with an attack: specifically, the attack of a masked intruder on white mechanic Larry Ott, long suspected of the murder of one teenaged young woman and more recently suspected of the disappearance and possible murder of another. Meanwhile, black police constable Silas Jones discovers another murder victim and participates in the investigation into the man's death, the whole while experiencing an intuition that Larry, whom narration reveals is an old friend, is in trouble. When he learns that Larry has been shot and seriously injured, Silas begins an informal investigation into that crime as well, both investigations leading him and the reader into a series of encounters with the past.

Alternating chapters, recounting present and past events from the points of view of Larry and Silas, reveal that Larry was the last person to see teenaged Cindy Walker alive; that no evidence was ever found to conclusively link her to what was generally believed to be her death; and that in the years since Cindy disappeared, Larry has been ostracized by virtually everyone in the town of Chabot Mississippi, where he grew up and continues to make his home, and where he is the prime suspect in the recent disappearance of Tina Rutherford, a member of the wealthiest family in the area. Narration in both past and present also reveals that Larry and Silas were close when they were children, but the mean-spirited intervention of Larry's sadistic father Carl drove them into a confrontation that resulted in Larry shouting a racial epithet, something for which Silas could never forgive him. Finally, narration reveals that shortly after Cindy disappeared, Silas went away to complete his schooling, while Larry stayed in Chabot.

In the present, Larry survives the shooting but remains in a coma. Silas takes care of Larry's home and livestock and continues to investigate what happened, discovering evidence that other investigators miss. He also investigates the placement of a poisonous snake in the mailbox of a young woman from the poorer part of town, and has an encounter on the road with a law-breaking young man who introduces himself as Wallace Stringfellow.

Eventually, narration reveals several layers of truth in the various mysteries. First is the fact that Larry developed an odd sort of friendship with Stringfellow, who was strangely obsessed with the idea that Larry might be a killer. Second: Silas confesses to his girlfriend that he was with Cindy Walker on the night she died, their interracial relationship having to be kept secret from the community; and that he didn't speak up about it, thereby making it clear that Larry was innocent, because as Silas' mother once said, something was "missing" in him. Third: a search through Larry's family home provides evidence to Silas that Carl was both his and Larry's father. And finally, various pieces of evidence come together to make both Silas and Larry conclude, independently of each other, that Stringfellow was involved in the disappearance of Tina Rutherford (whose body is found by Silas) and that Cindy Walker's immoral step-father was probably responsible for her disappearance (her body was never found).



A confrontation between Silas and Stringfellow results in the latter's death and the former being placed in a hospital, where he is put in the same room as Larry. Silas confesses to Larry what he has found out about their shared parentage, and Larry (now off the hook for both murders, since Silas has also revealed to the police the truth about his relationship with Cindy) realizes just how much he has been betrayed. Silas, however, begins the process of making amends, and Larry begins to re-awaken to the value of their friendship.



Chapters 1 - 2

Summary

Chapter 1 (The Present) – The chapter and the book open with this sentence: “The Rutherford girl had been missing for eight days when Larry Ott returned home and found a monster waiting in his house.” Narration describes the storm the night before; Larry’s routine around the farm where he lives (including taking care of his mother’s chickens, all named after American First Ladies); his family history (a bachelor in his forties, father dead, mother ill with Alzheimer’s disease in a nursing home), and hints at a troubled personal history, including a reference to not being allowed a gun “because of his past”, his being a “person of interest” in the disappearance of both “the Rutherford girl”, and a girl named Cindy Walker. When Larry comes home from work to get ready to take his mother to lunch, he finds a man in the house, wearing a grotesque zombie mask and holding a gun (something in the eyes behind the mask seems “familiar”). Larry tries to calm the man, but gets shot and falls unconscious. When he wakes, he’s covered in blood and the man is nervously watching him. He then tells Larry to die. “Okay with Larry,” narration comments.

Chapter 2 (The Present), Section 1 – This chapter is told from the point of view of Chabot’s constable, Silas Jones, who investigates an unusual group of circling buzzards and discovers the body of an old classmate known as M&M who had become a town character, on permanent disability and selling marijuana on the side. Silas waits by the body, and eventually other investigators show up – the hard-nosed Chief French (medical examiner) and Emergency Medical Technician Angie, with whom Silas is having a sexual relationship. After leaving them to their work, Silas drives back to his office, with narration describing the run-down condition of Chabot, economically poor and mostly abandoned despite the presence of the Rutherford Mill. Back at the office (where, narration comments, the window is held open by a book), Silas looks out at the mostly abandoned main street as he banters with Miss Voncille (the friendly, overweight town clerk) and reflects on his past relationship with Larry Ott. Narration here includes references to the disappearance of Tina Rutherford (who never arrived at college after a visit home) and the years-earlier disappearance of Cindy Walker (who was never found after going on a date with Larry Ott, the last person to see her alive). After being told by the returning Chief French that Larry has been interviewed about Tina Rutherford’s disappearance, Silas becomes uneasy, and heads out to Larry’s farm, narration referring to a past relationship that ended because of “what Silas had done, how he’d beaten Larry when Larry said what he said” but which had been renewed recently by Larry, who had called Silas on the phone. Silas, however, had not returned the call.

Chapter 2, Section 2 - Silas’ trip to Larry’s farm is interrupted by a call from Miss Voncille, who tells him that a woman has found a rattlesnake in her mailbox. Silas heads over to investigate, calling Angie on his cell phone and asking her to take a run out to Larry’s place and have a look. When he arrives at what he thinks of as White Trash Road (where several down-on-their-luck families live), he finds the snake in the mailbox



of Irina (an attractive woman whom he has to resist flirting with) and, before the watchful attention of the residents of the street, gets the snake out of the mailbox and kills it. He checks to see if Irina and/or her room-mates have any idea who could have left the snake, and they say it could be any one of a number of crazy boyfriends. He leaves Irina his card, and she promises to get in touch if anything else happens. Silas then drives to the Rutherford Mill, where he is responsible for directing traffic during shift change. As he's waiting for a train to clear the road, he gets a call from Angie, who is at Larry's place. The chapter ends with Angie only able to say "Oh my God."

Analysis

Aside from introducing the novel's two central characters (Larry Ott and Silas Jones) and its two main plots (the mystery of what happened to the two missing young women, and the mystery of the friendship between Larry and Silas), this chapter is primarily notable for the many foreshadowings it contains. Almost every incident, every encounter, every character referred to in this section plays a role, more or less significant, in the unravelling of the above mentioned two mysteries. Of all these elements, several are particularly important: the zombie mask (which later plays key roles in both plots); the reference to the eyes behind the zombie mask being "familiar" (which foreshadows the eventual revelation of who exactly IS wearing the mask during the attack); the snake in the mailbox (important in terms of the later revelation of who put it there); the character of Irina (who later in the narrative provides key information that helps Silas solve the mystery of who attacked Larry); and how Silas gets that information); and the reference to a confrontation between Larry and Silas in the past. This last relates more to the mystery of what happened between the two former friends, but as the narrative later reveals, Silas' feelings about this particular confrontation play a role in how his investigation into Larry's role in the two disappearances both plays out and resolves.

Other important elements in this section include the introduction of the novel's narrative style (i.e. its alternating chapters); its vivid sense of setting and place (i.e. its portrait of the economically depressed, racism-defined Southern Mississippi community in which the action unfolds); the introduction of several of its key themes; and the introduction of several repeated images or motifs. The most notable of these relates to the references to snakes, which make several appearances throughout the story in a variety of contexts and with a variety of meanings. There are also the first of several references here to books: specifically to Larry's intense, almost obsessive love of books and reading, and, in contrast, Silas' view of books as reflected by the reference to a book holding up the window in his office.

Discussion Question 1

How does the book's thematic interest in the relationship between past and present manifest in this section? How does the exploration of this theme in this section relate to the book's at this early stage?



Discussion Question 2

How does the book's exploration of friendship reveal itself in this section?

Discussion Question 3

How does the detail of the book holding up the window in Silas' office relate to how books are portrayed elsewhere in the novel? Specifically, how does this detail relate to Larry's relationship with books?

Vocabulary

curator, disentangle, salvia, privet, adjoin, dismantle, spigot, registrant, lanyard, loblolly, insinuate, ungainly, secluded, discern, entrails, cubicle, unperturbed, vagrant, kudzu, feral, spate, odometer, dismembered, ostracized, jurisdiction, mongrel, cartilage



Chapters 3 - 4

Summary

Chapter 3 (The Past - 1979). This chapter is told from the point of view of the teenaged Larry. Narration describes his difficult relationship with his violent, redneck father Carl; how Carl, who, while driving Larry to school, got into the habit of giving a lift to a black woman (Alice) and her son (Silas) who had no winter coats and were shivering in the cold; and how Larry was “aware how unusual, inappropriate it was for black people to be getting out of a white man’s truck.” Narration also describes how, as the result of government-mandated racial integration, Larry was one of the few white students at Chabot’s mostly black school, and how the regular pickups of Silas and his mother stopped after Larry’s mother Ina found out about them; drove Larry to school one morning; and gave them coats (with the comment “You’ve never minded using other people’s things”). After that, narration reveals, Carl never picked up Silas and Alice again.

Narration also describes how Larry, overweight and not inclined to be either athletic or mechanical, struggled to ingratiate himself with Carl by working at his garage; how Larry loved listening to his father tell often racist stories to the old men who came into the garage; and how he stayed “hidden, listening, the stories weaving his imagination and the sounds of his father’s voice into what must have been happiness.”

One day, while his parents are gone, Larry takes one of his father’s rifles and goes into the woods. As he passes the home of Cindy Walker (whom, narration reveals, he has romantic / sexual fantasizes about), narration then flashes back to an earlier time when Larry’s desperation to belong to a group of popular boys led him to make a viciously racist comment to a black girl at school, which in turn led him to be attacked by the girl and some of the other black students. Back in this chapter’s main timeline, Larry continues through the woods and ends up outside of the home Silas shares with Alice. Silas discovers him, and the two of them first shake hands, then bond further over both Alice’s new car and the rifle taken by Larry, which Larry allows Silas first to shoot and then to keep temporarily. Silas, excited that he can shoot some squirrels for food, is grateful.

Chapter 4 (The Present) – Silas gets a call from Angie, telling him that Larry’s been shot but is still alive. She also tells him she’s leaving Larry’s farm, and will be at Chabot’s bar (The Bus) later if he wants to meet her. Silas heads over to Larry’s and starts his investigation, making sure to not disturb anything; taking note of the blood and the gun left on the floor where Larry’s body was found; and noticing just how much the place hadn’t changed in the twenty or so years since he was last there. Chief French then arrives and starts a more formal investigation, getting Silas to help him preserve footprints and tire tracks; noticing that there was beer in Larry’s refrigerator (unusual because, as French says, Larry didn’t drink); and commenting that Larry wasn’t allowed to have guns.



Eventually, both French and Silas leave the house and go home, French telling Silas to come back in the day when he can possibly see things better. They discuss the possibility of whether the incident had to do with the Rutherford girl's disappearance, and French says it's possible. Back in his cheaply furnished trailer, and after having a beer and getting ready for bed, Silas notices he has a message on his answering machine: it's from Larry, sent the night before, hinting that there's something important he wants to talk about, and asking him to call.

Analysis

The first point to note about this section is how it begins a narrative pattern that continues throughout the book: the shifting between events in the past and events in the present. This shift functions on a couple of important levels: to draw the reader more deeply into both narrative plotlines (i.e. the mystery plot, the friendship plot); and to employ narrative technique (i.e. style) to explore / manifest theme (i.e. substance) – specifically, the entwined themes of the relationship between past and present and the layering of the truth.

Other noteworthy elements in this section – specifically, in Chapter 3 - include the first of several developments in the book's thematic interest in racism (including, but not limited to, narration's comments about how black people getting out of a white man's truck might be perceived, and the confrontation between Larry and the black students at his school); and the introduction of some very important characters, particularly Carl Ott, Larry's father, and Alice Jones, Silas' mother. These characters, as the story eventually reveals, have a narratively significant relationship of their own, a relationship hinted at in the comments made by Larry's mother when she gives Alice the coats. Then there are the glancing references to Larry's longing for a relationship with his father: the sense of loneliness evoked by these references is a clear component in how he (Larry) reaches out to begin a culturally and socially inappropriate relationship with Silas.

Chapter 4, meanwhile, is defined by further developments in the present-day investigations into both the attack on Larry and the apparent attack on Tina Rutherford. Among the most significant of these developments are important pieces of evidence (of which the most significant is arguably the beer in the refrigerator, the revelation of who brought it playing an important role later in defining the identity of Larry's attacker). Another element that plays a similarly important role in eventual revelations of the truth is the phone message left by Larry for Silas, the full implications of which are revealed in the novel's final chapters. All these developments, in both the past and the present, play out and/or develop the novel's ongoing interest in two of its key themes: the relationship between past and present (in that questions asked in either time frame are often answered, at least in part, in the other) and the layering of the truth (in that answers, or truths, revealed in each chapter lead, in turn, to more questions).



Discussion Question 1

What are the implications of the comment made by Larry's mother after she gives the coats to Silas and Alice?

Discussion Question 2

How is the theme of friendship developed in this section?

Discussion Question 3

What are the possible connections between the references to Larry and his relationship with / handling of guns in these two chapters?

Vocabulary

fume, threadbare, oddity, asthmatic, pudgy, venison, doppelganger, physique, hydraulic, grimace, eulogize, confluence, trajectory, reverent, discern, mildew, requisition (v.), obliterate, partial



Chapter 5

Summary

Chapter 5 (The Past - 1979) – On the first Saturday of summer, Larry looks forward to not going to school and to starting a high school in the fall where he thinks he won't be bullied. His father tells him to cut the lawn, which Larry realizes will take at least half the day, but starts it right away so he can get it over with. As he mows, he reflects on how much time he'd spent with Silas during the spring (including chasing and capturing snakes).

After the lawn is done, Larry goes over to the cabin in the woods, where he watches Silas pitch baseballs into a tree and later takes him over to see if they can catch Cindy Walker sunbathing. At the Walker place, they see Carl (Larry's father) and Cecil (Cindy's stepfather) try to take off her towel when she comes out on the deck after having a shower. Silas interrupts them, telling them to stop but running away before they can come after him. Larry gets away unseen, and later discovers Silas, who has again started playing with his baseball.

That night, Carl asks Larry for the rifle he borrowed (Part 2), but Larry says he doesn't have it, and is eventually bullied into revealing that he loaned it to Silas. At that point Larry's mother interrupts, demanding to know how long Carl is going to let Alice and Silas stay in the cabin where they live. Carl storms out. Later, Larry's mother comes to sit with him on his bed, praying for him to find "a special friend" as she always has, unaware that in Larry's mind, he's found one.

The next day, as he is again visiting Silas, Larry is shocked to discover that Carl has followed him, and is drunkenly determined to get his rifle back from Silas. He then decides to make Silas and Larry fight over who gets to keep the gun, and while both initially refuse, Carl bullies them into it. Larry's childhood stammer returns as he pleads with Silas to let him go. Carl cheers Silas on, and Silas continues to hold Larry down. In frustration, Larry calls Silas a "nigger". Silas lets him go, Carl awards him the rifle, and Larry recognizes the same anger in his eyes as he saw in the black girls at school who attacked him (Part 2). Silas pushes himself away and flees. "Larry was left alone, on the ground, in the weeds, with his father."

Analysis

This chapter is significant primarily for its portrayal of the confrontation between Silas and Larry. Here it's important to note that it's not the fight that Silas resents so much, and which eventually triggered the end of their friendship: it's the use of the word "nigger". The latter was Larry's choice: he was bullied into the fight by Carl, but the use of the "n" word was his (Larry's) choice entirely – one he immediately regrets, but one that has serious consequences that no-one involved in the incident could foresee.



Meanwhile, this section contains one of the most overt and/or vivid developments in the theme of racism in the book. Finally, it's important to note that later in the narrative, when an important aspect of the relationship between the three men (Larry, Silas, and Carl) is revealed, the events here take on an even greater, arguably an even more horrific implication.

Other important elements in this section include another appearance of the snake motif; the reference to Larry mowing the lawn (which foreshadows another lawn-cutting in Part 6); the references to Cindy Walker and to her stepfather Cecil (both of whom play increasingly important roles in the mystery plot as the narrative unfolds); Silas' confrontation of Cecil and Carl (which is eventually revealed as a key moment in the relationship between Silas and Cindy); and Ina's anger about Alice and Silas continuing to live in the cabin (an implied foreshadowing of the later revelation about the relationship between Carl, Alice, and Silas). Also in terms of Ina, it's important to note the closeness of the relationship between Ina and Larry here, and in particular, Ina's prayer that Larry find a friend, a prayer referred to several times in the narrative and which, as the narrative later suggests, was answered in an unexpected way – or rather, a SECOND unexpected way, given that the friendship between Larry and Silas was Larry's FIRST unexpected friendship.

Discussion Question 1

In what contrasting ways is the theme of friendship developed in this chapter?

Discussion Question 2

How do developments in this chapter reflect the book's thematic interest in how the truth has layers?

Discussion Question 3

Why do you think Ina is so concerned with Larry finding a friend? What aspect of her marriage / family life do you think is reflected in this prayer?

Vocabulary

dismount, circular, salvage (v.), ambush, dodder, rudimentary, cleavage, bosom



Chapter 6

Summary

Chapter 6 (The Present), Part 1 – Silas has breakfast at a favorite greasy-spoon restaurant, and then starts his day's investigations. He begins with Larry's shop, and as he goes through Larry's office, he recalls coming back to Chabot for his mother's funeral, driving past Larry's shop, noticing Larry looking out the window at the street, not paying attention to him – and doing exactly the same thing when he (Silas) was on his way back home after clearing out his mother's house. He then goes out to Larry's house and gathers some new evidence: a few pieces of broken glass (which he thinks might be from a car windshield), some tracks from a four-wheel drive, and the butt end of a mostly smoked marijuana cigarette. He also feeds the chickens. Back in the house, he goes through Larry's stack of old magazines, remembering seeing some of them when he and Larry were friends; goes through the attic and discovers several papers including contracts for the sale of some Larry's land to the Rutherfords; bills for a cell phone; and a shoebox of photographs. He notes some peculiarities about the phone bills ("the only calls listed were from a single number ... sometimes a call once a month, some months with no calls at all"), and then goes through the box of photos, taking note of how time is moving backwards in the photos, to when Larry was a baby ... and, much to Silas' shock, held on Alice's lap.

Part 2 (The Past) – Silas remembers when he was thirteen: a relatively good life in an all-black community in Chicago, a good school, but a bad boyfriend for his mother, whose arrest led them to sell all their belongings and disappear. Alice tells Silas that they're going south to where she knows people, but Silas doesn't want to go. After a long bus ride, they're helped by a friendly bus driver, who seems to want sexual favors from Alice (something Silas acknowledges) and who helps them when Silas attempts to run away and they're robbed of all their possessions, including their coats. Eventually, Alice and Silas end up in Chabot, making their way to the house in the woods.

Part 3 (The Present) – Narration describes Silas' reaction to the photo of his mother with Larry on her lap, recognizing that her smile was the one "she used around white people, not the one he remembered when she was genuinely happy". His thoughts are interrupted by a call from Angie, who wants to meet him for lunch and is concerned that he "sounds funny". He agrees to meet her and keeps the photograph, "vaguely aware he was stealing evidence from a crime scene" but not concerned: "the only ghosts here knew the secrets already."

Analysis

In the same way as the fight between Silas and Larry was the most significant narrative element of the previous section, the discovery of the photograph is the most significant element here. There are several layers of implied truth about the photograph: the most



obvious is that Alice had a previous relationship of some kind with the Ott family, but the less apparent implication is that that relationship has an even deeper significance to the fatherless Silas – an implication that gains more weight when other elements of this chapter (Silas having no father; the trip made by Alice, with Silas in tow, back to Chabot where, she says, she knows people) and previous incidents in the narrative (Ina’s comment when she gives Alice the coats; Ina’s reaction to Alice and Silas living in the cabin) are taken into account. That deeper implication is that Carl was Silas’ biological father; that Ina knew; and that Alice and Silas were sent north to live in Chicago to keep the truth from being revealed. Several themes are developed in this one moment: the “layers to the truth” theme; the “relationship between past and present” theme; and the “racism” theme, in that the implied birth of a mixed-race child (Silas) in the aftermath of a sexual relationship between a white man of status and privilege (Carl Ott) and a black woman servant (Alice) is not that much different from similar scenarios known to have frequently played out in the days of slavery and beyond.

One last point about the discovery of the photograph: it can be seen as a manifestation of the book’s thematic interest in coming of age, in that Silas’ realizations resulting from his discovery play an important role in helping him face important truths about himself and about his past. Such realizations are often key points in coming-of-age stories.

Other important elements in this section have to do primarily with developments in the mystery plot – specifically, the discovery of new evidence (the broken glass, the marijuana cigarette end, the tire tracks, the cell phone bills) on Larry’s farm. The meaning of these items appears later in the narrative, all playing a key role in revealing the truth about who assaulted Larry in Chapter 1.

Discussion Question 1

What is the implied true reason that Alice returns to Chabot with Silas? Why does she choose Chabot? What does she hope to gain there?

Discussion Question 2

Is Silas justified in taking the “evidence” from the “crime scene”? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 3

How is the book’s thematic interest in the relationship between past and present developed in this chapter?

Vocabulary

camouflage, recur, scythe, silhouette, loiter, impediment, clandestine, disservice



Chapter 7

Summary

Chapter 7 (The Past, 1982) – Sixteen year old Larry excitedly tells his parents he's going on a date with Cindy Walker, with narration describing (in a brief flashback) how it was Cindy who asked him. Over the intervening days between her invitation and the actual date, Larry becomes both excited and nervous; manages to make friends with the guys at school who had bullied him (who are impressed that he's actually got a date); and endures an assault from Cecil (who demands that he treat Cindy well) when he goes to pick Cindy up. As they're heading to the drive-in where they're supposed to be going to see a movie, Cindy insists on taking the wheel: when she does, she turns the car around, speeds away, deliberately runs over a snake, and then takes them to a secluded roadway. There, Larry is disappointed to learn that Cindy wants to date him as a cover for a visit she wants to make to her boyfriend in another town. She also confesses that she's pregnant. Larry is deeply disappointed, but goes through with her plan, dropping her off near a road and arranging to pick her up later. He then goes through with her plan to show up at the drive-in, making it look as though she's with him in the front seat of the car and disappearing when one of the guys from school starts heading in his direction.

When the time comes for Larry to reconnect with Cindy, she doesn't show. Larry waits for an hour, but there's no sign of her. Eventually he goes to her home, where Cecil and Cindy's mom are shocked by the fact that she's missing. They call both Larry's parents and the police, the latter asking Larry to tell them everything. He does, except the parts about pretending she's at the drive-in and that she was pregnant. Eventually, however, as days pass without Cindy turning up and as suspicions begin about what happened, Larry is forced into telling the truth, which isn't believed but which doesn't lead to any kind of arrest because there is no evidence. Eventually, Carl's business dries up; he becomes an alcoholic; and he breaks his neck in an accident. Ina becomes more and more absent minded and sad; and Cindy's parents move away. Larry is allowed to join the army, where he is trained as a mechanic and eventually discharged. He returns home to take care of his mother, whom he eventually moves into a nursing home when her Alzheimer's makes her too difficult for him to handle. Narration comments that by this point, Silas has left to attend high school in another town, and reveals that as years passed, Larry became more and more isolated. "Nights he spent alone," narration comments, "seldom thinking of his mother's old prayer, the one where she asked God to send him a special friend. Until it was answered."

Analysis

The most narratively significant point to note about this section is that it is the most important layer of truth revealed to date about what happened to Cindy Walker (making it thematically significant as well). Specifically, it offers details as to exactly why Larry



was, and remained, the prime suspect in her disappearance. At the same time, it is also an important piece of foreshadowing, in that it hints that there is a fuller, deeper truth about what happened that night, a truth hinted at here (i.e. by the references to Cecil) and which is eventually revealed later in the story. Meanwhile, the theme of “layers to the truth” is also developed in the narrative of Larry’s encounters with the police following Cindy’s disappearance, encounters in which the layers of HIS truth are mercilessly peeled away until a truth that no-one in authority wants to believe is eventually revealed (note the irony: truth is not necessarily something that people want to hear).

Other important points to note in this section include the developments in Larry’s character and story (the portrait of his loneliness and simultaneous desperation to please being vividly sketched in here); yet another reference to snakes (this one mercilessly and deliberately destroyed by Cindy); and, in the latter half of the chapter, the summing up of Larry’s life (such as it is) in the years following Cindy’s disappearance. Of the briefly glimpsed details here, the most significant is the last: the reference to Ina’s prayer for Larry being answered. Later in the narrative, the story of just how that prayer WAS answered is told, and can be seen as tying in with both narrative lines (i.e. the mystery plot, the friendship plot) and several themes (including “layers to the truth”, “friendship”, and “the relationship between past and present.”)

Discussion Question 1

How is the “relationship between past and present” theme developed in this section?

Discussion Question 2

Why do you think Cindy chose Larry to be the one to participate in the cover story for her?

Discussion Question 3

What do you think is the connection between Larry's "involvement" in Cindy's death and what happens to Carl? And/or what happens to Ina?

Vocabulary

plaintive, vocational, lacerate, dissipate, sustain, diorama



Chapter 8

Summary

Chapter 8 (The Present) – At the local diner, Silas waits for Angie to arrive for their lunch date. When she finally gets there, their first conversation is about Larry – how he’s still unconscious, how French believes he shot himself, and how Angie believes he might have done so either because of lingering guilt about killing Cindy and/or Tina Rutherford or because of everybody suspecting him of doing so.

This leads Silas to confess his friendship with Larry to her; to tell the story of how he and Alice came to Chabot; and how the friendship between him and Larry grew despite his apparent weirdness (his constant reading, his fondness for snakes) and his being rejected by everyone at the school where they went. He tells a story of how Larry was invited to be part of a haunted house party because of a particularly realistic zombie mask he owned, and how everyone at the party (including Silas and Cindy) rejected him after the party was done. At the mention of Cindy, Angie asks whether Silas had ever gone out with her: for a moment Silas is tempted to “tell her”, but then chooses not to.

Shortly afterwards, Angie is called to an accident site. Silas then visits Larry, and finds out that he’s barely alive, being kept in a coma, and afterwards visits Ina, Larry’s mother, but finds that conversation with her is impossible because of her advanced Alzheimer’s. He asks the nurse to let him know when Ina is having a good day, and the nurse agrees. After his visit, he sits in the parking lot remembering the one time he visited Larry’s home (a visit that took place before the fight between Larry and Silas portrayed in Chapter 5): Larry’s family was gone, and Silas wanted to cut the lawn, never having had an opportunity before. He barely gets the job done before Carl comes home, and Larry gets all the credit – which Silas overhears. Walking home in the night afterwards, Silas feels the lack of a father deeply ...

... while, in the present, adult Silas reflects on what he has come to believe is his family situation: his mother, made pregnant by Carl, was sent to have her child in Chicago, but when it didn’t work out up there, she came back to Chabot, where she reconnected with Carl.

While driving out to revisit the cabin where he and his mother used to live, Silas passes a young white man driving a tractor in the middle of the road. He pulls the boy over, warns him against his bad driving, and notices a white pillowcase in the back of the tractor, making Silas wonder if he’s dealing with someone from the Ku Klux Klan. The boy gives his name as Wallace Stringfellow, and Silas lets him go with a warning. Silas then heads for the cabin (on the fringes of the Ott property) where he and his mother used to live, reflecting on how she always used to ask him “What’s missing out of you, Silas?”; on how badly he treated her, rejecting her love and affection; and on his odd friendship with Larry.



Silas eventually arrives at the cabin, and is quickly shocked by how much it has deteriorated, being eaten away by encroaching vines, weeds, and plants (which narration describes as being snake-like). He notices how, in spite of most of the place seeming abandoned, that someone had broken in ... and, in the midst of remembering how cold it was when he and his mother first arrived, also notices that someone has dug a grave underneath what used to be his bed.

Analysis

The primary point to note about this chapter is how it introduces new elements to the mix of the two main plots (the mystery plot and the friendship plot) and, in doing so, raises more questions in the mind of the reader.

As previously discussed, in works of this genre (i.e. mysteries), if a new element is introduced and given a sense of prominence or importance, that element is either going to be important to the resolution of the mystery or is a false clue (i.e. red herring). Two elements introduced in this section fall squarely within the boundaries of the former: Silas' silence in response to Angie's question about whether he dated Cindy, and the introduction of Wallace Stringfellow. Silas' silence, in actual fact, makes a very clear statement about what his answer probably is, but the actual answer has deeper, layered implications for both plot lines that are revealed in later chapters. Meanwhile, the introduction of Stringfellow foreshadows later revelations in the narrative also relating to both stories, and to several of the novel's themes, including its interest in friendship, the relationship between past and present, and "layers to the truth".

Other important elements in this section include the reference to the zombie mask (playing a role in this reference to the past that is eerily similar to its first appearance in the present – i.e. during the attack on Larry) and the reference to the Halloween party (the events of which turn out to have more significance than the glimpse that they are afforded here suggests). Then there is the reference to Ina's having Alzheimer's Disease (which, aside from providing a narratively significant obstacle to Silas' goal of uncovering several different truths, also evokes the novel's thematic interest in the relationship between past and present); the references to snakes (here and throughout the novel metaphorically reflecting both the individual identities and circumstances of Silas and Larry and their relationship); and the explicit references to Silas' beliefs about Carl (which foreshadow later events in the narrative when Silas reveals those beliefs to others).

Finally, the chapter's final image (of the grave having been dug beneath Silas' old bed) draws the reader irresistibly further forward into the story, with the answers to the questions the image raised again being implied, but not explicitly answered until the chapter after the next one.

Discussion Question 1

What is the implication of Silas' silence when Angie asks him whether he dated Cindy?



Discussion Question 2

Now that the narrative has revealed that Carl is actually Silas' biological father, reconsider the events in Part 3, Chapter 5 – specifically, the fight engineered by Carl between Silas and Larry. What layers of meaning / feeling / intention can now be read into that confrontation?

Discussion Question 3

At this point in the narrative, what would you say the answer to Alice's question about Silas might be? What do you think might be missing in him?

Vocabulary

disheveled, furlough, anonymity, ventilator, adjacent, viscous, foliage

Chapter 9

Summary

Chapter 9 (The Past) – Narration at the beginning of this chapter describes how, in the early days of Ina's being afflicted with Alzheimer's, she never noticed things disappearing from the barn, or the traces of someone being there: but Larry, narration also reveals, did notice, but kept everything a secret from his mother. Narration also reveals that eventually, Larry discovered that the intruder was a young, skinny, blond boy whom Larry scared away one day while wearing the zombie mask. A few years later, narration reveals, a young man named Wallace Stringfellow came to visit Larry, and Larry recognized him immediately as the young man he scared years before. Wallace claims to be a cable TV salesman, but Larry soon figures out that he's not. On a subsequent visit, Wallace eventually confesses that he's not a cable TV salesman; that he was curious to meet Larry because of his reputation; and that to him, it doesn't matter whether or not he did actually kill Cindy Walker (although Wallace does eventually confess to imagining what raping and killing her must have been like).

Over the next several months Wallace visits repeatedly, becoming comfortable enough to smoke marijuana (that he bought from M&M) around Larry (occasionally throwing the butts of his marijuana cigarettes into the yard); reveals that he owns a dog named John Wayne Gacy; gives Larry a gun as a Christmas present; reveals that he remembers being frightened by Larry on the occasion of his very first visit years ago; and, eventually, that he's actually sexually excited by the thought of Larry killing Cindy.

One night, after smoking and drinking a great deal (having brought some beer and put it in Larry's fridge), Wallace tries to cajole Larry into telling him the truth about what happened with Cindy, talking about how sometimes women want to be raped and hurt. When Larry says he didn't do it, Wallace erupts in a temper, breaking Larry's windshield and headlights and storming off. After he goes, Larry realizes that he has come to regard Wallace as a friend – the sort of "special" friend his mother had always prayed for him to find.

Analysis

The first point to note about this section is the reappearance of the zombie mask, which is again evocative of a kind of power and respect that Larry doesn't usually get, and which in this particular appearance has a powerful irony associated with it that doesn't become apparent until the second-last section of the book, and the identity of the person who shot Larry is revealed (see "Section 10"). Other points to note include the name of Stringfellow's dog: John Wayne Gacy was a real-life serial rapist and killer of young men who was eventually executed for his crimes. The fact that Stringfellow gave this name to his dog says a great deal about Stringfellow: it also raises questions about Larry's choice in friends that might be answered, in a very dark facet of the book's



thematic interest in friendship, by the simple fact that by this point in his life, ostracized by the people of his home town for years, Larry was desperate to be friends with anybody. This, in turn, lends a significant irony to Larry's realization about his "friendship" with Stringfellow; to the hopes of his mother; and to later moments in the book, when the narrative reveals just what kind of "friend" Stringfellow has actually been.

Meanwhile, this chapter is noteworthy for its references to several objects referred to previously, answering important questions about where they came from and/or how they came to be at Larry's place. The references to these items do two things: develop and deepen the mystery plot, and manifest the book's thematic exploration of how the truth has so many layers.

Discussion Question 1

What are the clues in this section that suggest Wallace is the person who tried to shoot Larry in Chapter 1? Think not only of things or situations referred to here, but to things / situations referred to elsewhere in the narrative.

Discussion Question 2

This chapter, set in the past, explores the book's thematic interest in the past / present relationship in a couple of ways. What are those ways?

Discussion Question 3

What verbal clue (i.e. in what he says) does Stringfellow give that suggests that he might be the kind of man he thinks Larry is?

Vocabulary

bandolier, contort, acute, goiter, scald, hasp, fabricate, abstain



Chapters 10 - 11

Summary

Chapter 10 (The Present / The Past) – The perspective of this chapter shifts repeatedly (and, in the first part of the chapter, quite rapidly) between the recent past and the present. Narration reveals that the body under the bed (found by Silas at the end of Chapter 8) was that of Tina Rutherford, and that she'd been there for some time. Narration also reveals that Silas lied about his reasons for being at the cabin (saying he just happened to be passing); that he directed traffic for Tina's funeral; and that took a shift standing guard over Larry in the hospital, who remained in his coma and who was being watched by police. At different times during different shifts, Silas becomes aware that a "stringy" man has tried to see Larry, and catches a glimpse of the man himself; also becomes aware that Angie is desperately trying to get hold of him; and warns the comatose Larry that when he wakes up, things are going to be bad for him.

Silas also gets word that Ina Ott is having a good day, and goes to visit her. For a moment or two she recognizes him as Larry's friend, and also recognizes Larry in the photograph that Silas gives her of Larry and Alice, referring to Alice as her and Carl's "maid" and telling him she (Alice) became pregnant and had to leave their employ. Shortly afterwards, however, she slips back into dementia. Eventually, Silas manages to find time to spend with Angie, and she firmly tells him to finish the story he began earlier (Part 6, Chapter 8).

At that point, the narrative slips into the past as it describes the beginning of the affair between Silas (then a high-school baseball star) and Cindy Walker, desperate to get out of Chabot and change her life. The affair went on for several months, both of them believing they kept it a secret – meaning that Silas was deeply shocked when Alice told him she knew about it, and that he had to stop. The weekend after receiving this ultimatum from Alice, Silas says (narration now back in the present), was the weekend that Cindy disappeared: HE was the boyfriend she told Larry she was going to meet (but Silas doesn't think she really was pregnant). He tells Angie he and Cindy argued; that he left her where she had arranged for Larry to pick her up; that after he got home Alice arranged for him to go to another high school; that he forgot both Larry and Cindy; and that he didn't think about the consequences of his actions until he moved back to Chabot a few years ago.

After Silas finishes telling his story, he and Angie theorize that Cecil was the one who actually killed Cindy, and then go back to Angie's home, where they spend a sexless night together. The next day, Silas drives his jeep (with now-broken signal lights) out to Larry's farm where he feeds the chickens and contemplates his next move. He asks the question of himself that his mother asked: "What's missing out of you, Silas?" And this time he answers: "Courage." A moment later, Silas receives a call from the hospital: it looks as though Larry is waking up.



Chapter 11 (The Present) – This chapter is told from Larry’s point of view, the first few pages narrating his flashes of memory (of the shooting, of being in the ambulance, of Silas visiting) and of consciousness as he wakes up. He learns that Silas saved his life; that Tina Rutherford is dead; and that he is suspected of her murder, and of shooting himself. He worries first about the chickens, asking if they’ve been fed, and is relieved (and a bit curious) to learn that Silas has been taking care of them. When he asks to see Silas, the request is denied. Larry is then interviewed by Sheriff Lolly (who was one of the junior investigators when Cindy Walker was killed) and by Chief French, who offers several pieces of evidence (including the fact that Larry never sold the piece of land with the cabin where Tina’s body was found) to suggest that Larry killed both girls, and then tried to kill himself out of remorse. Narration portrays Larry’s mind racing through memories and images and his confusion about why he would even be suspected. French tells him that the only way he’ll ever feel better about what he did “is to own up and pay the price.” The chapter ends with Larry saying “okay.”

Analysis

A lot happens in these two chapters, particularly in Chapter 10: the characters and the reader are given a lot of information, and a lot of layers of truth are both peeled away and revealed, making the sequence of events portrayed here both narratively and thematically significant. This aspect of the chapter (the entwining of theme and action) also manifests in the style of the chapter – specifically, in how the interaction of past and present happens quickly, tightly, and with increasing energy. Meanwhile, another of the novel’s key themes begins to come to the fore in this section: its exploration of “coming of age”, or of growing up. There is the sense here that as Silas finds himself forced to admit the truth of his past, he is finally, actually, growing up and facing responsibilities he should have faced years ago. He is, in fact, “coming of age”, a process that is encapsulated in his realization of the answer to his mother’s question, and continues for him throughout the remainder of the narrative.

One piece of information that the readers don’t have at the beginning of Chapter 10 is the explanation of why Silas did all the things he did – lied about why he was at the cabin, took care of the chickens, stood guard over Larry. That explanation can be found in the latter half of the chapter – specifically, in Silas’ revelation of what happened between him, Cindy, and Larry. There is the very strong sense here that Silas feels intensely guilty about what happened to Larry as a result of Cindy Wallace’s disappearance, and in doing what he does for Larry, is trying to make some sort of amends. There is the strong sense that more remains to be done in this area, but at this point the narrative doesn’t really make it clear how far Silas is actually prepared to go with this action.

Other elements developed in Chapter 10 include the racism theme (referred to throughout Silas’ story about his relationship with Cindy, such a mixed-race relationship being looked at unfavorably in that part of the world); the reference to Silas’ broken signal light (which foreshadows further breakdowns in his vehicle, all of which in turn foreshadow important moments later in the narrative dealing with the eventual repairs);



and the long-awaited answer to the question posed by Alice about what's missing in Silas' character.

Chapter 11, meanwhile, is stylistically unique in the novel, in that it's the only chapter that takes the reader so deeply, so thoroughly, and so presently into the experience of one of the characters. Yes, up to this point, the reader has been privy to the thoughts and feelings of the two central characters: there has not, however, been the sort of empathic, in-the-moment writing such as dominates the narration of Larry's experience of coming out of his coma. The events of the chapter put pressure on Larry, as the two investigators (Lolly and French) intend, and add a layer of suspense to the reader's experience: chances are good that the reader will, by this point, have picked up some of the fairly clear indications that Larry is innocent of the crimes of which he is accused, and will now be wondering not whether he IS innocent, but whether that evidence will be presented in time, and he will be SEEN as innocent. The raising of this question draws the reader thoroughly into the events of the next chapter.

Discussion Question 1

Do you think that what Silas does for Larry in this section, or tries to do for him, is enough in terms of trying to make amends? Why or why not? At this point in the narrative, what more do you think Silas could / should do?

Discussion Question 2

Do you agree with Silas' self-assessment, in response to his mother's question, that he lacks courage? Why or why not? In what ways has he displayed courage in the narrative? In what ways has he displayed cowardice?

Discussion Question 3

At this point, given what the narrative has revealed about the piece of land where the cabin is located and Larry's connection to the people who lived there, what do you think is the most likely reason he has not sold that land?

Vocabulary

perimeter, retch, jurisdiction, scant, catheter, trifecta, invincible, cleat, concave



Chapters 12 - 13

Summary

Chapter 12 (The Present) – Silas arrives at the hospital, and interrupts French and Lolly’s interview of Larry. After he and Larry greet each other, Silas reveals to everyone in the room what really happened on the night of Cindy Walker’s death, telling Larry that Cindy was not pregnant and implying that it was probably Cecil who killed her. At that point, Lolly concludes the interview, but not before Larry comments to Silas that they used to be friends. Silas comments that Larry might have been his friend, but he (Silas) doesn’t know what he was.

Down at the police station, Silas is interviewed by French, and tells him everything “but being Larry’s half-brother.” He’s told that Larry as good as confessed, and is then taken off guard duty. He goes back to the hospital and although Larry wants to talk about what happened around Cindy Walker’s death, Silas insists that he (Larry) talk about what happened the night he was shot. Larry, however, wants to apologize for what happened the night that Carl made him and Silas fight. Silas insists on Larry talking about the shooting, but before Larry can say anything, Larry’s guard interrupts, and Silas goes. Later, he’s having drinks in the bar when he’s discovered by Irina, the trailer park woman with the snake in her mailbox (Part 1, Chapter 2). They flirt a little, and then Irina reveals that she has a clue for him: one of her other roommates went on a “date” with a guy who, when he took her back to his place, not only had a trailer full of guns but also a collection of snakes. She reveals that the guy’s name was Wallace Stringfellow and identifies where he lives, and Silas remembers encountering Stringfellow (Part 6), also recalling the pillowcase that Stringfellow had with him and that Larry once said a good way to transport a snake was to use a pillowcase. He drives Irina back to her trailer, goes in, and is about to have sex with her when he thinks of Larry, and of Angie, and decides to go.

Chapter 13 (The Present) – This chapter is narrated by Larry’s point of view – lying in his hospital bed, flicking endlessly through the more than a hundred channels available to him on the hospital television. A thunderstorm rages outside as he remembers his childhood – Cindy; Silas; him and Silas drawing and coloring together; their teenaged years; the zombie mask. And on television there’s “a show about a serial killer and the serial killer who imitated him” and “a king cobra rising with its hood fanned.” He sees an item on the news about him and what he’s suspected of doing to Tina Rutherford, and realizes he’s got something to tell French: how shortly after Tina disappeared, Stringfellow visited him and said he “done something”. The conversation went on a while longer, but then Stringfellow left. Larry decides he’s going to tell French everything he knows about Stringfellow, and how likely it is that he (Stringfellow) killed Tina Rutherford. And then he goes back to changing channels on his television, reflecting on how much the world changed and on how only four people in the world “knew about the cabin where that Rutherford girl was buried. [Him. His mother], who can’t remember anything. Silas Jones. And Wallace Stringfellow.” He also reflects on his mailbox: how it

had been assaulted and damaged over the years as an intimidation tactic, and how he's determined to make it secure and stable.

Analysis

Narrative momentum begins to build in this section as the story approaches the climaxes of both its plots – specifically, the revelation of the truth about who is responsible for Tina Rutherford's disappearance and the attack on Larry (the climax of the mystery plot); and the confrontations and reconciliations that make up the climax of the friendship plot. Here it's important to note that while the former climax seems inevitable (and also thematically significant, in that the final layers of truth are about to be pulled away to reveal the core truth they've been concealing), the latter climax seems much less so. There is the strong sense here that the friendship between Larry and Silas, the friendship around which the novel's exploration of the friendship theme is built, is by no means going to be renewed, and is, in fact, in more trouble than perhaps even when they were kids and Larry called Silas "nigger".

Other significant elements in this section include a couple of interesting variations on a late emerging motif, or multiple image: the mailbox which, in its two manifestations here, seems to tie-in quite tightly with Larry's sense of identity. The snake in Irina's mailbox can be seen as suggesting how Larry's identity has been corrupted by the beliefs about him: the shoring up of the mailbox suggests that Larry, who senses that he is about to be free from the tortures of the last several years, is about to become both able and prepared to shore himself up and become a stronger human being. Then there is Silas' decision to not have sex with the flirtatious Irina (which can be seen as a choice that shows a kind of courage that up to this point Silas, according to his mother, seems to have lacked – a choice that, in that context, foreshadows other courageous, responsible, coming of age choices that Silas is about to make); one last reference to the zombie mask, before the ultimate truth about what the mask represents and / or has kept hidden is revealed; and the sense that the thematically significant tension between the past and the present is finally going to resolve as soon as the truth about the past is not only revealed, but accepted.

Discussion Question 1

What does Silas mean when he tells Larry that he "doesn't know what he was"? How does this relate to what Larry said previously (that he thought they were friends)? Which of the novel's key themes does this conversation relate to, and how?

Discussion Question 2

Why is it more important for Larry to talk to Silas about their childhood fight than about how he (Larry) got shot?



Discussion Question 3

What is metaphorically significant about the “serial killer” program that Larry chooses to not watch? How does that program reflect what’s going on in the narrative?

Vocabulary

delirium, convulse, estimation, stethoscope, manacle, circumstantial, exonerate, oblivious, proportion, elongated



Chapters 14 - 16

Summary

Chapter 14 (The Present) – Silas wakes up hungover, but gets himself together enough to get himself some breakfast, check in at work, and then stop by the hospital. He learns that French is gone for the day, interviewing a suspect in the killing of M&M. He stops by Larry's home and feeds the chickens, then finds out Stringfellow's address from Voncille and tells her he's going out to interview him. He sees Stringfellow's dog tied up in the yard, and finds Stringfellow on the porch with coffee. He manages to get into the house, where he sees aquariums full of snakes and a zombie mask that Stringfellow says he can't recall getting. Stringfellow goes outside to calm the dog. Silas follows, sensing trouble and trying to call for backup, but unable to grab his phone or his radio. Stringfellow lets the dog off its chain and it attacks Silas, who eventually kills it, but is seriously wounded. Stringfellow gets a gun from inside the house but Silas gets behind him and shoots him in the thigh. Stringfellow hobbles into the woods as Silas stumbles into the house to find a phone. He is unsuccessful and clumsily breaks one of the aquariums, coming face to face with first the zombie mask and then a rattlesnake, freed from the aquarium.

Chapter 15 (The Present) – Again trying to speak to French, Larry learns about the attack on Silas (who's now in surgery) and who was responsible for the attack. He speaks to French over the radio, telling him everything he knows and suspects about Stringfellow (that he was the man who shot him, and that he was probably the man who killed Tina Rutherford). Later, French brings the zombie mask by, and Larry identifies it as his. French reveals that Stringfellow is dead, telling Larry to watch the news to find out how. He then questions Larry about why he and Stringfellow became friends. Larry semi-jokes that he didn't really have many options. He also adds that he tried to call Silas to tell him what he knew and suspected, but Silas never returned his calls. French tells him it's time that he and Silas actually started talking to each other. After he goes, Larry reflects on the relationship between the past and the present, and wonders what would have been different in the present if things had happened differently in the past. His thoughts are interrupted by the arrival of Silas in a hospital bed, having just gotten out of surgery to repair his dog-torn arm.

Chapter 16 (The Present) – Narration reveals that Silas' arm will eventually heal; that he asked to be put in the same room as Larry; and that on the news, the story of Silas' confrontation with Stringfellow is a headline, the report revealing that Stringfellow killed himself in a battle with police (who had been dispatched to his property by the concerned Voncille) and that evidence had been found linking Stringfellow to the death of Tina Rutherford. In the aftermath of the news report, Silas tells Larry everything he knows about Carl being his (Silas') father. Larry confesses that he had an idea of the truth, as long ago as the incident with the coats (Part 2, Chapter 3). They compare notes on what it was like to grow up with him (in Larry's case) and without him (in Silas's), and then Larry asks to be moved to another room.



Analysis

Narrative and theme entwine yet again in this chapter, as the tension in the relationship between past and present resolves itself and, simultaneously, the events of this section pull away layer after layer of truth to reveal the core truths at the heart of the book's mystery plot. Aside from this chapter containing the climax of that plot in Silas' confrontation with Stringfellow, there are several other important elements. The first is how narration develops a sense of suspense: specifically, by giving a character (Stringfellow) a statement (that he doesn't know where he got the mask) that the reader knows is a lie and probably has an idea of what the truth really is. It's an effectively deployed technique in many narratives of this genre, dramatic as well as prose, and works well here to build tension and momentum on the climb towards the climax. The initial reference to Stringfellow's dog (barking his head off at Silas when he comes to the property) functions in a similar way: the reader knows that the dog is vicious and has been given the name of a serial killer. As soon as the dog appears, the reader is likely to think "this is not going to be good".

Another narrative technique effectively deployed in this section is how the author reveals the truth of an event, or sequence of events, across different chapters and different points of view. Throughout the book the author keeps an essential line of action moving forward in a single progression of events, but breaks up how those events are described by placing them in different chapters; narrating them from different points of view, and interrupting their movement by flipping back and forth between the present and the future. Again, the technique is an effective one for drawing a reader into the action and the narrative of that action.

Other important elements in this section: the next-to-last important appearance of the zombie mask; one of the final appearances of snakes in yet another of their symbolic appearances; and finally, the groundwork being laid (at the end of Chapter 16) for the climax / resolution of the book's second main plot: the friendship plot, resolved in the following (and final) section.

Discussion Question 1

Consider Quote 13, taken from Chapter 16. What are the metaphoric implications of the "explosion" referred to at the end of the quote?

Discussion Question 2

Now that the narrative has revealed that Stringfellow was the person who shot Larry while wearing the mask, think back to Part 7, Chapter 9 – specifically, its reference to Larry's encounter, while wearing the mask, with a young intruder who turned out to be Stringfellow. Where is the irony in these two references?



Discussion Question 3

Why is Larry's response to the question about his friendship with Stringfellow (that he didn't have many options) both blackly funny and painfully true?

Vocabulary

opiate, paraphernalia, emulate, radius



Chapters 17 - 19

Summary

Chapter 17 (The Present) – This chapter, while told from Larry's point of view, focuses on the succession of visitors received by Silas: first Angie (who makes up with him and makes a point of inviting Larry to her church); then Voncille (who brings flowers); then the Mayor (who jokes with Silas about directing traffic); a couple of deputies (who tell Silas about the rest of the snakes found in Stringfellow's home); and finally Chief French, who tells both Silas and Larry that Stringfellow has also been linked to the death of M&M, and that the press is determined to interview them both, adding that he wants them to just stick to the facts of the story and not get into whatever personal disputes are between them. After French goes, Silas is discharged, promising to come see Larry. After he goes, Larry tells the nurse that he's changed his mind, and doesn't want to be moved to a new room.

Chapter 18 (The Present) – Silas is interviewed by the reporter for the local paper, who excitedly looks forward to the awards she thinks she's going to win after the story is published. He is then interviewed by the Mayor and Voncille, but instead of being reprimanded, he discovers that he's being promoted. He thanks them, but then says he'll confirm acceptance of their offer after they've had a chance to read the article in the paper and react. He then goes to Angie's and submits to a day and night of pampering, going the next day to visit Larry with a box of mail. Larry is silent for the entire visit, but Silas stays for an hour. He pays a visit to Larry's mother, reminiscing with her even though she doesn't know who he is, and then goes out with Angie to Larry's house, where they work on cleaning it up. Silas spends a fond, reminiscent moment with the rifle that he had been given by Larry, which he had carefully cleaned and now puts back in its proper case.

Chapter 19 (The Present) – Narration describes Larry's consistent but amiable silence during Silas' four days of visits; a positive report from his doctor; and his visit to the front door of the hospital, where he sees all the press waiting to interview him and retreats to the elevator unnoticed. That night, he walks out of the hospital also unnoticed – except by a security guard who knows Silas and calls him on his cell phone. Silas, still at Angie's, gets in his jeep and, after a rough start, drives off to find Larry. Silas gives him a lift through town and out to Larry's home, Larry mostly silent – except when he notices how rough Silas' jeep is running. When they get out to Larry's place, Silas asks whether Larry might be interested in repairing it, and Larry says it'll be a while before he's able to work. Silas then prepares to leave, but not before he gives Larry a plastic bag with his wallet, keys, and cell phone. As Silas pulls away, Larry calls to him to bring the jeep by the next day. Larry goes in the house, and Silas watches through a window as he, Larry, discovers the cleaning and other things that Silas and Angie have done for him (including, narration reveals, installing satellite TV and taking care to feed the chickens properly). Eventually, Larry goes to bed, reminding himself to call Silas in the morning and get him to pick up some parts for the jeep.



Analysis

The first point to note about this section is how it, like the previous section, takes place entirely in the present. There is the sense that now that the tension between the past (i.e. what was Larry's involvement in the death of Cindy Walker; what secret about the past has Silas been keeping) and the present has been resolved (by the answering of both questions), the narrative has no need to return to the past. The present, for both these characters, is more important: the truth, to paraphrase a well-known cliché, has set them free, and the narrative is more interested now in what they're going to do with that freedom.

In Silas' case, he clearly wants to continue making amends for concealing the truth about Larry's involvement, or lack thereof, in the death of Cindy Walker. This seems to be the clear motivation for most, if not all, his actions in this section – that, and the concurrent desire to renew their friendship. Here again, narrative and theme interact, with the events of this chapter manifesting and embodying the book's thematic interest in friendship.

All that said, it should be noted that while the narrative has foregone one of its storytelling tropes (the flipping between past and present), it sustains another: the flipping back and forth between the points of view of the two main characters – that is, until the final chapter, which is told from both their points of view. Meanwhile, the chain of events around Silas' car (and Larry's eventual decision to work with Silas to repair it) can be seen as a metaphoric representation of the theme of friendship (and, arguably of racism, in that the friendship, both in the past and in the present, transcended race – with a couple of vivid exceptions). That theme does not climax until the very last line of the book, in which Larry finally opens himself to the possibility that the most important friendship of his life can be if not renewed, at least re-examined.

This, in turn, leads to discussion of this section's final significant point: the fact that while the last line is summing up the theme of friendship, it's also summing up the "coming of age" theme. Silas has, in many ways, already come of age as the result of the events of the novel: he has grown up, faced his responsibility, and taken action to make amends. In the final moments of the book Larry (whose physical recover from physical assault metaphorically parallels his psychological recovery from moral and emotional assault) also comes of age: he grows up, realizing that for his own sake and for his own sense of well-being, he has to let go of the past; embrace the present for what it is; and embrace or forgive his old friend for both what he was, and what he is.

Discussion Question 1

How does Silas' treatment of Larry's rifle manifest the book's thematic interest in the power of friendship?



Discussion Question 2

Chart and describe Larry's transformation over the course of this chapter, specifically in terms of his relationship with Silas.

Discussion Question 3

How does the shared point of view of the narration in Chapter 19 reflect the book's thematic interest in friendship?

Vocabulary

ruddy, reprimand, decipher, convalesce, penance, chambray



Characters

Larry Ott

Larry is the first of the book's two principal characters. Their relationship, played out in both the past and the present, is the primary manifestation of one of the book's key themes: the enduring power of friendship.

The two men are simultaneously very different and quite similar. In terms of the latter, both men lack positive father figures; both were close to their mothers; and both experience social ostracism and/or isolation. In Larry's case, his father was violent and abusive, and died relatively early in Larry's life, while his increasingly vulnerable mother was one of the few people in Larry's life who made a point of demonstrating her affection and compassion for him. In terms of being socially ostracized, Larry's childhood and youth was troubled by dismissiveness and verbal violence from his peers, much of which was triggered by his lack of athletic ability and his consuming passion for books.

In terms of the differences between the two men, these fall similarly into four main categories: temperament, adult relationships, career, and race. Again in Larry's case, his temperament is arguably that of the loner (i.e. thoughtful, solitary, sensitive, and emotionally troubled), his lack of adult relationships defined as much by those aspects of temperament as by his external circumstances (i.e. being suspected of being a killer). In terms of career, Larry can be seen as being quite unsuccessful: his garage has practically no business, and he is relatively unsuccessful, even for a down-on-its-luck town like Chabot. The primary difference between Larry and Silas, however, is that of race: Larry is white, while Silas is black. Here it's important to note, however, that Larry's race does NOT gain him any more respect than Silas receives: arguably, Larry is as much an outcast (as a result of what is believed about him) as Silas is (as a result of the color of his skin).

Silas Jones

Silas is the second of the book's two main characters. In addition to his role in playing out the book's thematic exploration of the enduring power of friendship, Silas is also the key figure in the book's thematic exploration of racism.

In terms of the similarities between Silas and Larry: where Larry's father was emotionally violent and otherwise absent, Silas' father was completely absent (i.e. Silas grew up the child of a single mother - the irony being, as the narrative reveals, that both Silas and Larry had the same biological father, another similarity between the two characters). In terms of Silas' relationship with his mother, it tends to have been more complicated than that between Larry and his. While Silas clearly loved his mother, Alice, and while she tried to protect and take care of him in a way that Larry's mother never



did, there is also a sense that Alice never understood and/or connected with her son in the way that Larry's mother connected with hers. While both women recognized that there was something missing in their sons, Larry's mother could identify it, much to her son's gratitude: but Silas' mother never could, much to her son's resentment. Finally, and again like Larry, Silas was in many ways an outsider: in spite of his athletic success (as a baseball player), his race ultimately prevented him from being fully accepted and liked.

In terms of the differences between Silas and Larry, Silas' temperament was / is, in general, much more easygoing and/or outgoing than Larry's, an aspect of his identity that defines his adult relationships (which are generally affable, positive, and in the case of Angie actually sexual) in the same way as Larry's loner-ness defines his adult (which are generally none of what Silas' are). In terms of career, Silas has had a degree of success and gained a measure of respect from his peers and colleagues, both of which interact with Silas' ambition to give him a future, where Larry has little and/or none. This is in spite of the fourth degree of difference between the two characters: their race, which in some ways, and despite Silas' temperament, tends to limit him and the possibilities / opportunities in his life.

Tina Rutherford

Tina is the first of two murdered young women referred to in the story. The question of what happened to her is the present-day mystery that drives much of the book's plot. In terms of her identity or personality, she is sketched in much more lightly than the second young woman, Cindy Walker, but because she is a member of the wealthiest family in the generally impoverished area, it might be inferred that she at least had a degree of status that the other characters in the novel do not, making her disappearance / death particularly significant to the community in which it takes place.

Cindy Walker

Cindy is the second of the two young women whose disappearances / deaths define the book's plot and sense of mystery. Cindy's death took place in the past, its having remained unsolved for several years and affecting the lives of the people involved (particularly Larry Ott, her accused killer) being a primary manifestation of the novel's thematic interest in the relationship between past and present. Unlike Tina Rutherford the character / identity of Cindy Walker is vividly sketched in, as the novel includes several scenes / chapters in which she actually appears (as opposed to Tina, who is only spoken about). Cindy is portrayed as willful, sexual, somewhat selfish, and something of a troublemaker.

Carl Ott

Carl is Larry Ott's abusive, racist father. He is also the biological father of Silas Jones, who had a distant relationship with Carl years before he (Silas) knew Carl was his dad.



Carl is portrayed as cruel, sadistic, and insensitive, not just to his family but also to others in the community where he lives. He appears only in the past, having died before the primary events of the novel begin, yet is frequently referred to in the present.

Ina Ott

Ina is Larry's mother, and Carl's wife. She is portrayed as being compassionate and sensitive towards her son, and outspoken towards her husband (in terms of what she believes is the appropriate way to behave). She appears in both the past and the present: in the latter, she is in a hospital suffering from Alzheimer's disease. At one point, a break in the fog of her memory provides Silas with information that changes his life and eventually that of Larry as well.

Alice Jones

Alice is Silas' mother and, as narration reveals, at one point was the maid of Carl and Ina Ott. Impregnated by Carl, Alice moved to Chicago, where she raised Silas as best she could but was forced to move back to Mississippi by the betrayal of a boyfriend. Simultaneously fiercely protective of her son and confused by aspects of his character (i.e. something that she sees as "missing" in him), she is portrayed as strong-willed and determined, but simultaneously (and perhaps paradoxically) resigned to the difficulties of the situation in which she finds herself - as a black single mother of a child fathered by a married white man.

Cecil Walker

Cecil is the step-father of murdered Cindy Walker. He appears a few times in the narrative, mostly in passing and portrayed as nasty, inappropriately sexual, and emotionally abusive. While the narrative never makes it explicitly clear, there is the sense from many of the characters involved that he is likely the person who actually did kill Cindy.

Wallace Stringfellow

This young, very disturbed, poor white man first appears as someone Silas suspects of breaking driving laws; later appears in the past as someone with whom Larry develops an odd kind of friendship; and is later revealed to be guilty of several of the novel's crimes, including the death of Tina Rutherford. He is portrayed as being emotionally needy / violent, and ultimately psychotic.



Angie

Angie is an emergency medical technician and the girlfriend of Silas Jones. Sexual, outspoken, and compassionate, her determination to both know and protect Silas is a primary element in his facing and coming to terms with his history.

Chief French

French is the district chief investigator, examining crime scenes for evidence. Blunt and experienced, cynical and just a little racist, he is grudgingly admiring of Silas' skills and success, and is also extremely suspicious of Larry's involvement in the disappearances of both Tina Rutherford and Cindy Walker.

Miss Voncille

Miss Voncille is Chabot's town clerk and police dispatcher. Friendly and intelligent, she banters with Silas while he's at the office and eventually saves his life when she doesn't hear from him after he's attacked by Wallace Stringfellow and his dog.

Irina

Irina lives on what the novel refers to as "White Trash Road", a part of Chabot where the people who live there are poor and tend towards illicit behavior (i.e. drugs, prostitution). Irina first encounters Silas when he investigates the appearance of a poisonous snake in the mailbox she shares with her two roommates, and later encounters him again when she provides information about who might have put the snake there, information that eventually leads Silas to Wallace Stringfellow. Irina is sexual, flirtatious, and aggressive.

Sheriff Lolly

Lolly is the area's sheriff, and is put in charge of the investigation of both the shooting of Larry and the attack on Silas. By the book and cautious, he has clear ideas of what happened in both cases but nevertheless follows the due process of his investigation.

Symbols and Symbolism

Books

Principal character Larry Ott is portrayed throughout the narrative as a hungry, even voracious reader, particularly of books by best-selling horror writer Stephen King. There is a sense that they are, for him, both an escape (from a horrible childhood and an equally horrible adulthood) and his only friend.

Guns

Throughout the narrative, various guns represent the attitudes of the different characters towards violence. Early in the book, for example, narration makes a pointed comment about how Silas never uses a gun, while also early in the narrative, Larry's father lets him use one of his rifles, an event that has multiple layers of significance as outlined below.

Carl's Rifle

Of all the guns that appear and/or are used throughout the narrative, Carl's rifle is perhaps the most significant. For Larry, when Carl gives him permission to borrow it, it represents at least a glimpse of affection and respect from his dad - while his dad's violent reaction when he learns that Larry had loaned it out represents a betrayal / ending of even that glimpse. For Silas, both when he borrows it initially and later cleans it in time for Larry's return home, it represents friendship.

The Zombie Mask

At several key points in the narrative, there are references to a horrific yet realistic full-head mask of a zombie. On one level, the mask is a literal representation of identity being concealed: on another level, when the identity of the person who wore it during the attack on Larry in Chapter 1 is revealed, it becomes a catalyst for the revelation of truth.

Snakes

Snakes of various types and in various circumstances make up and/or define the most consistent and most vividly deployed symbol or motif (i.e. frequently employed symbol) in the book. They often tend to evoke death or deception of some kind or another.



The Photograph of Alice and Larry

This photograph, found by Silas after a search of Larry's attic, reveals a secret to Silas about his family - specifically, about the identity of his father. It is one of several objects that give the book's thematic interest in the relationship between past and present an actual physical presence in the characters' lives.

Marijuana

Marijuana is portrayed as a loosen-er of inhibitions (particularly when it appears in the narrative in relationship to psychotic killer Wallace Stringfellow) and, in the same way as the zombie mask, serves as evidence of / a catalyst for revelation of the truth.

Larry's Mailbox

Throughout the narrative, the mailbox stationed on Larry's driveway can be seen as symbolizing Larry himself. The way the mailbox is abused / beaten up under various circumstances represents how Larry himself is / has been beaten up, while later revelations of his intention to strengthen and take care of that mailbox represents ways in which he, following the revelation of his innocence, is himself stronger and better taken care of.

Alzheimer's Disease

Alzheimer's Disease might be described as a disease of the memory: it eats away at a person's recollections, leaving him / her with virtually no memory of themselves or of the people around them. The presence of Alzheimer's in the novel (specifically in the character of Ina Ott and the reactions of those around her) can be seen as a facet of the novel's thematic interest in the relationship between past and present: specifically, how the forgetting of the past can lead to either unhappiness and suffering (in Ina's case) or healing (in the case of Silas and Larry).

The Chickens

On the farm that once belonged to his family but now only belongs to him, Larry takes care of his mother's beloved chickens, all named after famous First Ladies of the United States. For him, this action represents caring and compassion even in the face of suffering and guilt. Later, when Silas takes over the caring for the chickens, his action represents and/or foreshadows the growing / maturation of his own sense of compassion, a maturation that eventually leads to his revelation of the truth of what happened on the night that Cindy Walker disappeared.



Settings

Mississippi

The economically troubled state of Mississippi is the broad strokes setting for the novel. A southern state with a history of racism and slavery, it is an appropriate setting for a story that has, to a significant degree, racism as both a key theme and a defining factor in much of its action.

Chabot

This is one of the small Mississippi communities where much of the action is set. In spite of the presence of a large, productive mill, the town is economically depressed and, in narration, looks it, with run-down and abandoned buildings, wild-growing weeds, and a bar in the back of an abandoned school bus.

Fulsom

This is the second of the two communities in which the action of the narrative is set. Like Chabot, Fulsom is economically depressed, although slightly better off as the result of a Wal-Mart store in the town. The name "Fulsom" is ironic, in that the word "fulsome" can mean "abundant" or "lush".

The Ott Property

The land owned by the Ott family, and now maintained by Larry Ott, is the setting for much of the novel's action in both the past and the present. The property includes the farm home of Larry Ott (in the past, his family home) and a cabin in the woods where, in the past, Silas lived with his mother Alice and where, in the present, the body of Tina Rutherford is discovered.

The Late 1970's / Early 1980's

This period in the past, the teenage years of Larry Ott and Silas Jones, is the setting for much of the book's action - specifically, the chapters / sequences detailing the the individual lives of the two characters; the development and breakdown of their friendship ended (making this setting particularly relevant to the novel's thematic exploration of the nature and value of friendship); and the events surrounding the disappearance of Cindy Walker.



Themes and Motifs

Layers to the Truth

There are two primary plot lines at work in this narrative: the mystery plot (i.e. what happened to Larry, Tina Rutherford, and Cindy Walker), and the friendship plot (i.e. what happened to the childhood friendship between Larry and Silas in the past, and what's going to happen between them now). There are aspects of mystery and suspense in the second plot, and there is unarguable interaction and/or interrelationship between the two in terms of action and events and information. The two plots are thematically linked as well: specifically, by the idea / concept that there are layers to the truth. Both plots, ultimately, are about the peeling away of those layers to find the core truth beneath. In the case of the mystery plot, the core truth is eventually revealed to be that the present-day crimes portrayed in the book were committed by the same person: psychotic killer Wallace Stringfellow. In the case of the friendship plot, the core truth has two parts: that, in the past, Larry committed what Silas believed to be an unforgivable betrayal (i.e. calling him a “nigger”); and that in the present, their suddenly-revealed biological relationship (they share the same father) is less of a defining factor in the process of rebuilding their friendship than compassion, honesty, and a willingness to make amends / rebuild fences.

In order to get to each of these truths, and in both plots, the characters have to dig through layers of other, more superficial truths – bits of physical, emotional, and psychological evidence that simultaneously obscure core truths and reveal them, facts that answer some questions in the same moment that they ask others. This evidence is not limited to physical evidence like unique tire tracks, cans of beer in unexpected refrigerators, and roach ends of marijuana cigarettes: it also includes psychological evidence like uneasiness, sadness, anger, and frustration. Ultimately, all this evidence leads both the central characters and the readers into truths that explain not only what happened and how, but why. This, in turn, leads to the second of the book's primary themes, which manifests not only in content but in structure: the relationship between past and present.

The Relationship between Past and Present

As the two plotlines in the book move forward, manifesting the thematically-defined action of cutting through layers of the truth to get to a core truth beneath, narration also moves backwards into the past, cutting through layers and history to get to a core truth there, a truth that's essential for both the reader and the central characters to recognize and accept in order to understand the core truth of the present. Who the characters are NOW, the novel suggests – alleged killer, investigator, estranged friends – is defined by who they were THEN ... what they did (or didn't do), how they interacted (or refused to interact), the secrets they kept (or should have).



This theme, like the “layers of truth” theme, plays out in relationship to both plot lines. In terms of the mystery plotline, certain objects in the present are given meaning by their appearances in the past. A key example of this is of the zombie mask, with its appearances in the present triggering mystery; its appearances in the past adding layers, explanation, and irony to that mystery; and its final appearance in the present explaining its presence in an event (the attack on Larry) in the more recent past (i.e. a revelation at the end of the novel referring to an event at its beginning). In terms of the friendship plotline, however, the relationship / interplay between past and present is perhaps even more significant: hints of present tensions between Larry and Silas are both contrasted by references to past happiness and explained by narrative enactments of events that brought that happiness to a verbally, emotionally, and physically violent end. It’s somewhat simplistic, and almost cliché, to say that in this novel, the present exists because of the past, but because so much of what happens and exists in the present is very pointedly, very vividly connected to the past, such a statement is nevertheless a clear evocation of one of the book’s key thematic premises.

Race Relations

The action of the novel is set within the geographical context of the American South, which has a powerful cultural and historical context of racism – specifically, of tensions between blacks and whites. These tensions go back for centuries, to the time of slavery and before, and continue (as the novel suggests) into both the novel’s relatively recent past (i.e. the late 1970’s / early 1980’s) and its present day. The question, though, is this: how much do questions of race infuse and/or define the breakdown in the friendship between Larry and Silas – or, for that matter, its beginnings?

The racial origins of the two boys (Silas black, Larry white) definitely and clearly shape the way in which they play together and/or interact at school: it doesn’t seem to have any effect on how they look at / see each other and their relationship ... until, that is, Larry is forced by his abusive father to call Silas “nigger”, an epithet with all its associated hatred and fear that Silas (rightly?) sees as a deal-breaker - friendship-breaker is perhaps a better term. So racism definitely plays a role in the breakdown of the friendship – but in its fragile reinstatement? On one level, the novel creates the clear sense that the circumstances of that reinstatement are defined more by Silas’ being honest about issues between himself and Larry that have nothing to do with race. There is the simultaneous sense, however (implied, never overtly expressed) that, as part of his atonement for his role in arguably ruining Larry’s life, Silas is forgiving / has forgiven Larry for his part in the dispute that ended their friendship – for calling him “nigger”. In other words, the racial tension in this scene - or rather, the transcending of such tension – is implied, rather than overt. It may be, in fact, a component of the novel’s fourth significant theme – coming of age.



Coming of Age

The phrase “coming of age”, when used in relationship to literature or other forms of narrative, refers to an emerging into maturity, a growing up – a discovery that the world and things in it (situations, attitudes, values, relationships, people) are not what they seemed to be. The term is often taken to mean / refer to circumstances in which idealism becomes corrupted to some degree, innocence becomes knowledge, and childhood and/or youth becomes young adulthood. Of these definitions / transitions, innocence becoming knowledge is perhaps the most universally true of the “coming of age” experience. This is because a person can be innocent (i.e. lack knowledge) of many things, everything from sex to the potential for evil in the world and in people to family truth. This last is perhaps most significant in the case of this book, in which both central characters begin the story innocent of both their true relationship. Meanwhile, Larry is innocent of the truth of what happened to Cindy Walker, while Silas, although not exactly innocent, is still somewhat immature when it comes to taking responsibility for the truth / his actions. For both men, as a result of learning the truth about their pasts and their respective presents, the end of the narrative means they have both “come of age” into a new maturity, a new wisdom, and if not a new relationship, at least a better informed, wiser one.

One last variation on “coming of age” relates to developing a sense of freedom from past attitudes, beliefs, and perceptions. This is Larry’s experience as he, in the novel’s final sections, starts to realize, believe, and accept that the truth about himself is, in fact, something much more than what he had been told about himself; let to believe about himself; and decided was true about himself. In Silas’ case, that freedom relates to freedom from anger and resentment about Larry and his (Larry’s) role in the confrontation that ended their friendship, an element of the story that relates to its final principal theme.

Friendship

Ultimately, all of the novel’s themes (as noted above) can be seen as tying into and/or relating to an examination of friendship: how it’s longed for, how it works, how fragile it can be, what happens when it ends, how possible it is to renew, how possible it is to delude oneself into believing in a friendship when it is, in fact, something else.

This theme is primarily explored by two relationships, each one including outsider / loner Larry Ott. The first, and primary, friendship considered by the book is that between white, uneducated and un-athletic Larry Ott and black, educated baseball player Silas Jones. The friendship begins as the result of proximity (i.e. the two boys living close to each other); develops as the result of mutual loneliness, shared secrets, and compassion (particularly on Larry’s part); and disintegrates when their respective races (which to that point had been a defining factor in how they explored their friendship but not in whether the friendship could actually exist) become a tool for destructive manipulation, or manipulative destructiveness, by the man whom neither knows is their



shared biological father, Carl Ott. Grudges are carried for decades, until honesty manages to enable the boys-now-men to transcend their mutual unhappiness with each other. It is a relationship healed by truth.

The second, and secondary, friendship explored in the narrative is that between Larry and Wallace Stringfellow. This friendship begins as a result of curiosity (i.e. Wallace's curiosity about alleged murderer Larry); develops as a result of loneliness and need (on Larry's part) and of obsession and perhaps repressed same-sex attraction (on Wallace's part); and disintegrates when Wallace is unable to accept the truth from Larry about what happened to Cindy Walker. In clear and vivid contrast to the friendship between Silas and Larry, the friendship between Larry and Wallace is primarily defined by a toxic entwining of painful solitude (on Larry's part) and a psychotic, vicarious engagement with a lie that Wallace desperately, madly, wants to believe is a truth. In other words, where Silas and Larry's friendship is based on a truth (their shared, race-transcendent, fundamental humanity) while Larry and Wallace is based on lies (Wallace's lies to himself and to Larry, Larry's lies to himself about Wallace's value as a friend). It's at this point that the themes considered here come full circle: back to the concept of layers of truth, through which Silas and Larry each have to go, in their respective key friendships, to get to the core truth beneath.

Styles

Point of View

The first thing to note about the novel's point of view is that it is constantly shifting: for the most part, chapters alternate between being narrated from the perspective of either white assault victim Larry Ott or black investigating police officer Silas Jones. The only exception is the final chapter, in which point of view shifts between the two characters within the chapter itself. . A second point to note is that whichever point of view is the focus in a given chapter, narration is always written from the third person limited perspective: that is, each chapter is about either Larry or Silas but explores and/or gets into the thoughts, feelings, interpretations, and/or the reactions (in other words, the inner life) of only that character. Other characters are portrayed through the interpretation of whichever of the two primary characters holds narrative focus in a given chapter.

The final element of point of view to consider is which character might be identified as the novel's protagonist. There are arguments for either character to be defined as such. In Larry's case, and on a purely structural / technical level, the story begins and ends with him, one common identifying factor in a protagonist. On a transformational level (i.e. which of the two main characters undergoes the deeper / wider journey of transformation, also a common identifying factor for a protagonist), Larry transforms on two primary levels: he goes from having no friends to having at least one; and he goes from being considered a guilty killer to being defined as innocent. On the other hand, there are aspects of his personality that don't change. For example, and in contrast to Silas, Larry always knows / lives from / admits the truth to himself; and, in a related point, he is honest with himself about the past.

Arguments for Silas being defined as the protagonist have primarily to do with his personal transformation. Unlike Larry, whose sense of self remains essentially the same from the beginning to the end of the novel (his reconnection with friendship notwithstanding), Silas undergoes more significant personal change: he discovers secrets and truths about his past in a way Larry never does, and as a result comes to terms with both a difficult history and a likewise difficult present also in a way Larry never does. Another way to look at this question: Silas seems to be more changed by Larry than Larry seems to be by Silas.

On balance, both sides of the argument seem to be relatively equally weighted.

Language and Meaning

There are several important aspects of the interaction between language and meaning in this book. Many are related to / defined by its setting: specifically in the American South (with his history of racial tension) and even more specifically in a poor, under-



educated area within the boundaries of what is defined as “The South”. Elements of language used in both dialogue and narration reflect both these circumstances: the dialogue in particular contains several conversational manifestations of racist attitudes, particularly the unnervingly casual use of the words “nigger” and “boy” (the latter most often used in references, by other characters, to Silas). The dialogue is also written both phonetically (i.e. with words on the page written as they sound) and in the vernacular (i.e. commonly used language) of the area. Ultimately, all these elements combine to create a vivid sense of both identity and atmosphere that lends a sense of veracity, or truth, to the writing.

Another important aspect of the relationship between language and meaning in “Crooked Letter ...” has to do with the genre in which it’s written: specifically, the mystery genre. There is a sense of layering to how the writing is shaped, of revelations of truth being slowly, teasingly, carefully revealed chapter by chapter, sometimes paragraph by paragraph or even sentence by sentence. This layering, or perhaps unveiling might be a better word, creates a sense of both suspense and emerging knowledge in the reader, shaping an effective suspense and / or desire to know what the core truth is. A related point here has to do with how clues and/or information are planted. A good general rule to follow when reading a mystery / suspense novel is that when an object, character, or piece of dialogue receives particular narrative attention, it means that that object is somehow important, either as a genuine clue or as a red herring (i.e. false clue). There are several, somewhat obvious, examples in this book of this technique being applied (i.e. the references to beer in Larry's fridge, the references to marijuana cigarettes smoked at Larry's farm), all of which add layers of intrigue and suspenseful questioning to the story.

Structure

The book’s structure is easily one of its most intriguing stylistic elements – specifically, its chapter-by-chapter structure. As noted above, the chapters alternate between the point of view of Larry Ott and the point of view of Silas Jones, starting with Larry and continuing back and forth throughout the book. Again as noted above, the exception is the final chapter, in which point of view moves back and forth between the two.

What’s significant about this shifting point of view is that beneath, or within, these shifts, there are two timelines at work: the present (which focuses on the investigation into the attack on Larry and the entwined investigations into the disappearances of Tina Rutherford and Cindy Walker), and the past (which focuses on the childhood friendship of Silas and Larry, and how that friendship first matured, then ended). For the most part, events on these two timelines proceed and/or unfold in a structurally linear fashion. Yes, in the past timeline there are leaps between events - leaps of days, weeks, years, even decades – but, again for the most part, the movement through that timeline is forward. There are exceptions: as the examination and recollection of the past (in the form of flashbacks) are recounted, there are moments at which the narration goes even further into the past – a flashback within a flashback, as it were. An example of this is when Silas (in the present day) tells Angie what really happened on the night that Cindy



Walker disappeared: his story is a flashback to the past, but goes further back INTO the past than the events in the primary past timeline have reached (i.e. Larry's friendship with Stringfellow, which began several years after Cindy's disappearance). This shifting back and forth is a clear manifestation of one of the novel's key themes: the relationship between past and present: an example of style and substance, of story and how the story is told, interacting to effective, engaging effect.



Quotes

M,I, crooked letter, crooked letter, I, crooked letter, crooked letter, I, humpback, humpback, I - how southern children are taught to spell Mississippi.

-- Author (Epigraph (Beginning))

Importance: These few lines at the beginning of the novel contain the book's first image, first lines, and the book's title.

And Larry did understand. If He'd been missing a daughter, he would come here, too. He would go everywhere. He knew the worst thing must be the waiting, not being able to do anything, while your girl was lost in the woods or bound in somebody's closet, hung from the bar with her own red brassiere. Sure he understood.

-- Narration (chapter 1)

Importance: In this early quote, narration sums up Larry's empathetic insight into the situation of the parents of the missing "Rutherford Girl", and why he understands why the sheriff has to search his home.

French went down the hall but Silas remained for a moment. He remembered this book, could see it in Larry's hands as Larry described the plot. For a moment the two boys were out in the woods, walking, carrying their rifles.

-- Narration (chapter 4)

Importance: In this quote, narration gives the reader a glance into Silas' experience of the past - specifically, his memories of time with Larry. The quote is one of several in the book that manifests the book's thematic interest in the relationship between past and present.

As he pushed the mower, [Larry] thought how Alice's car must have come from Carl, but Larry knew not to say more about it. He'd failed Carl before by not understanding that the black woman and her son had been their secret. He should have known that men do not discuss with their wives (or mothers) the business that is their own.

-- Narration (chapter 5)

Importance: Here the maturing Larry gains an insight into his father and his attitudes, part of the novel's secondary thematic interest in coming of age.

Silas knew what the bus driver wanted with his mother, and he thought how he, Silas, was in a way an impediment. Without him here, she could do whatever she needed to, without witness, to get through this cold night, to get wherever she was going. He knew his mother was beautiful.

-- Narration (chapter 6)

Importance: In this quote, narration portrays the wisdom, insight, and resignation of



young Silas as he realizes what's happening between his beautiful mother and the overweight white bus driver giving them a ride.

Their lives had stopped, frozen, as if in a picture, and the days were nothing more than empty squares on a calendar. In the evening the three of them would find themselves at the table over a quiet meal no one tasted, or before the television as if painted there, the baseball game the only light in the room, its commentators' voices and the cracks of bats and cheers the only sound, that and the clink of Carl's ice.

-- Narration (chapter 7)

Importance: Narration here describes the aftereffects of Cindy's disappearance on Larry's family: never really warm with each other, here they are portrayed as slipping deeply into their own isolations.

Silas ... felt, at that moment, most acutely in his life, the absence of a father. He'd walked home that night, through the darkening woods, aware that all this land ... was theirs, which meant it was Larry's, or would be. And Silas, who had nothing, looked up to where the sky had been now that he couldn't even see the tops of trees as night peeled down along the vines. He started to run, afraid, not of the darkness coming, but of the anger scratching in his ribs.

-- Narration (chapter 8)

Importance: Silas remembers how he felt while walking home at night after spending the day with Larry at his family's home - how he felt the lack of a father more keenly than than at any other time in his life.

He knew now she'd loved him despite his never writing her back, despite the trouble and fear he caused her, despite the thing missing out of him. He'd returned her love by rarely coming home, and when he did she'd doted over him ... he'd refused to see the truth, that she was starving from loneliness. In fact, he could barely look at her.

-- Narration (chapter 8)

Importance: As he walks towards his abandoned childhood home, Silas reflects on how badly he treated his mother as an adult, realizing the truth of what he meant to her and what her life meant to him.

And as the years pass, the black women pass, too. To Larry's count four had died in their sleep as Ina lived on, waiting for him to come, losing an hour at a time the days and weeks and months of her memory, until she, too, had forgotten her name and Larry's as well, the chickens last to go, and then even they were gone and now the ever-thinner woman he visited on Saturdays lay waiting to die without knowing it, alongside yet another black woman who also lay waiting, without knowing it, to die.

-- Narration (chapter 9)

Importance: In this quote, narration sums up the experience of Larry's mother, living and/or dying of Alzheimer's.



...he'd have to tell her something and worried it might be the truth. The rest of it. He'd avoided it so long himself it sometimes didn't even seem real, what had happened in 1982. He wondered how it would feel to tell her everything, say who he really was, and he worried that if he did, she might start to see him differently.

-- Narration (chapter 10)

Importance: In the middle of Silas' considerations about what he's going to tell Angie about himself, considerations that arise while he's standing guard over the comatose Larry, narration layers in even more hints to the mystery of what happened in Silas' past, and specifically what went on between him and Larry.

Things ain't so clear when they're happening, Angie. You're eighteen and playing ball and everything's going your way. Then all of a sudden twenty-five years've passed and the person you look back and see's a whole nother person. You don't even recognize who you used to be. Wasn't till I come back down here that I saw the mess I'd made.

-- Silas (chapter 10)

Importance: As his confession to Angie about his involvement with Cindy comes to an end, Silas pleads for her understanding with an explanation that he was a different person when it all happened.

...how these men understood his life so thoroughly and knew how people were in the world, in their hears, brains, what they were capable of doing when they drank a passel of Pabst Blue Ribbon beers and smoked a heap of dope, how sometimes women wanted to be raped, they were asking for it, you put the mask on so it wasn't you doing it ... he could feel the truth waiting for him, floating like a ghost in the room ... he seemed himself the man in the mask waiting by his door ... Mask Larry marching up to Face Larry, pushing the gun against his heart and the two Larrys merging to one with one heart and it's him holding the gun to his own chest, thinking how good it would feel to confess ..."

-- Narration (chapter 11)

Importance: This quote portrays Larry's confused, drug-and-pain addled state of mind while being interviewed in the hospital after regaining consciousness.

...Larry lay amid his machines, thinking of Silas, how time packs new years over the old ones but how those old years are still in there, like the earliest, tightest rings centering a tree, the most hidden, enclosed in darkness and shielded from weather. But then a saw screams in and the tree topples and the circles are stricken by the sun and the sap glistens and the stump is laid open for the world to see.

-- Narration (chapter 15)

Importance: In its portrayal of Larry's thoughts in the aftermath of his conversation with French about Stringfellow, metaphorically sums up the book's overall thematic perspective on the relationship between past and present.



For a moment Silas imagined it had always been like this, that they'd been normal brothers all the years of their rearing, both black or both white, sleeping side by side in matching twin beds. Instead here they were. Strangers. The sons of Carl Ott, injured, bandaged, like survivors of an explosion.

-- Narration (chapter 16)

Importance: This quote hints at ideas and/or imaginings experienced by Silas in the hospital bed next to Larry's in the aftermath of the confrontation with Stringfellow.