

The Cape Ann Study Guide

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Contents

The Cape Ann Study Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Plot Summary.....	3
Chapter 1.....	5
Chapters 2 through 6.....	7
Chapters 7 through 11.....	11
Chapters 12 through 16.....	14
Chapters 17 through 20.....	17
Chapters 21 through 26.....	19
Chapters 27 through 32.....	21
Chapters 33 through 38.....	23
Chapters 39 through 42.....	25
Chapters 43 through 49.....	26
Chapters 50 through 51.....	28
Chapters 52 through 53.....	29
Chapters 54 through 59.....	30
Chapter 60.....	33
Characters.....	34
Objects/Places.....	38
Themes.....	41
Style.....	43
Quotes.....	46
Topics for Discussion.....	47



Plot Summary

Papa, Mama and six-year-old Lark Ann Browning Erhardt sit down to dinner one evening and Mama opens the discussion of their plans to build a home. Papa Willie seems to have no interest in building a home. Mama Arlene and Lark would like a bigger home that offers Lark her own room. Lark is simply too old to be sleeping in her infant crib. Papa and Mama argue violently over who will get to go out for the evening and who will take care of securing a babysitter for Lark. Mama is upset because she feels Papa thinks her plans are always a joke.

Lark glances through the house booklets that Mama brought home and she chooses a design—#127—The Cape Ann. Papa never calls a sitter and takes Lark with him to the poker game. He brings her home at 5:30 the next morning to a livid Mama. Lark's parents have another violent fight when Arlene learns that Willie loses two hundred of the five hundred dollars they saved for a home. Papa thinks Mama breaks his ribs with the Heinz ketchup bottle.

Lark uses her imagination to escape inside the scenery of the banjo clock. The next day, Mama checks the classified ads for a job and she orders a typewriter. She and her daughter engage in a role-playing game called "Lady Caller" and Lark is able to talk about her concerns, worries and fears. Another way Lark deals with the complexities of her childhood is by making lists. Religion is a source of continual worry for Lark and she makes her sin list, so that she will not forget any of her many sins when the time comes for her First Confession at St. Boniface Catholic Church.

When Papa sees Lark's ragged fingernails, he spanks her with a brush. Each time he does this, he feels guilty. The first time, he takes Lark to go with him to catch night crawler worms for a fishing trip.

At the Knights of Columbus Memorial Day Picnic and Parade, Beverly Ridza befriends Lark and teaches her how to swim. Soon after, Lark and her Mama travel to Arlene's sister's house to help with Aunt Betty's very difficult pregnancy. Lark meets a magical woman named Maria Zelena, who has medical potions, and who saves her Aunt Betty's life. Maria cannot save the baby, however. Baby Marjorie dies. Lark feels guilty and takes the blame, internally, for not catching the infant when the stork drops her.

After the baby's funeral, Papa and Uncle Stan play poker. Papa loses four hundred and fifty dollars. He later sells their Oldsmobile to pay off the debt. Mama makes plans for Betty and Stan to get back on their feet financially. She sends Stan to California and Betty to their mother and father's in Blue Lake.

Lark does not bite her nails while away from her father and Mama tells Lark she can buy a bottle of nail polish to paint them. It is soon time to go back to school. Lark will enter the second grade.



Soon after, Hilly seems to be regaining his sanity, but the Erhardt ladies see a profound sadness about their usually jolly friend who came back from the World War mentally wounded, yet a hero nevertheless. Lark studies catechism each week with her friends and she experiences her First Confession and First Communion.

Mama wins grand prize at the Majestic Movie Theater, buys a car and opens a typing service. She saves money for the down payment on their new home. Mama is very resourceful, a hard worker and quite independent.

Lark and Mama then visit the Brownings' home, where Aunt Betty is staying. Aunt Betty comes home from a shopping trip hemorrhaging and the incident is kept secret. Mama brings Aunt Betty home to Harvester with her and Lark.

The second World War breaks out and Hilly is so devastated that he commits suicide by shooting himself in the mouth. Lark decides she will not go to the church anymore because the priest refuses to bury Hilly. He says that suicide is a mortal sin. Lark refuses to believe her friend Hilly is in hell. Rather, she thinks Hilly went to heaven.

As the family gets nearer to the time when they will build, Papa loses another five hundred dollars in poker. Mama tells Papa she is leaving for California with Aunt Betty and Lark, for good. The ladies go back to the Brownings to say their final goodbyes. When the ladies get on the last train, the one headed for California, Papa appears at the depot to tell them he wants them to come home. They head on to California.



Chapter 1

Chapter 1 Summary

"Next year at this time, I want carpenters working on our house," Mama said," (p. 1).

The Erhardt family—Papa Willie, Mama Arlene and six-year-old Lark—sit down to a dinner of fried pork chops, mashed potatoes and gravy, and Monarch brand canned peas. Papa proceeds to drag the tines of his fork through his daughter's mashed potatoes, into which Mama carefully pours a small well of gravy. He laughs and when Mama questions his behavior, he blames her for trying to pick a fight.

Mama revisits the house topic, stating that others in the neighborhood, who make less money than he, own their own homes. To this, Papa states that he does not care what others do. Lark does not understand why her father is not interested in owning a home. After all, he grew up in a nice home. Lark backs her mother's argument for a home of their own because she wants a room of her own. She no longer wants to sleep in her crib.

The Erhardts live in a room at the train depot, where Papa works as a clerk. The room measures twenty feet by twenty feet, with a fifteen-foot ceiling. Mama negotiates a rent-free arrangement with the railroad company, in hopes of saving money to build a house of their own. Papa, at first, finds many reasons to live somewhere else. After Mama decorates and furnishes the room, Papa becomes lazily content. As time passes, it is Mama who becomes increasingly discontented with their living quarters.

When Papa sees Mama's pin curls in her hair, he inquires as to her plans for going out. Mama cannot believe her ears, for she has been attending the bridge club every other Friday for several years. When Papa asks who will watch the kid, Mama exclaims that he will. To which he replies, he cannot; he has a poker game.

Mama cries and throws a wet dishrag at her husband, for he always seems to undermine her plans. When he walks out of their living quarters, she curses and threatens to show him.

Chapter 1 Analysis

Innocent six-year-old Lark navigates her convoluted childhood in the American town of Harvester, Minnesota during the years of the Depression. Her journey is challenged by misinformation and fairy tales, domestic abuse and poor familial relationships, money and the lack thereof, justice and injustice, and pursuit of the American Dream, culminating in the roller-coaster ride of a typical American childhood in the 1930s and 1940s. Lark loses much of her childhood innocence and grows into a little lady, capable of making her own wise decisions during this coming-of-age tale.



The Cape Ann opens with the greatest symbol of the American Dream: home ownership. This symbol is the cornerstone which separates the haves and have-nots. The American Declaration of Independence states that "all men are created equal" and the American people have a right to pursue life, liberty and happiness. Lark's mother, Mama Arlene, is a good example of an American who believes that she can achieve this better life for her family through hard work and a plan. Lark's father, Papa Willie, does not share Mama's dreams and seems to care less about a home as a status symbol, separating middle class folks from the poor. The pursuit of the American Dream turns into a nightmare. Threats to undermine the dream are abundant and irony is found in the attainment of the dream, because the attainment is fraught with unhappiness.

Other symbols of America include: the dinner cooked and served by the mother (fried pork chops, mashed potatoes & gravy, Monarch brand canned peas), apple pies, bridge club, poker, child rearing, family, keeping up with the Joneses, and Branding.

A foreshadowing event occurs when Papa takes his fork and drags its tines through Lark's mashed potatoes—the potatoes with a depression in the center and gravy carefully poured in by Mama. Papa and his behaviors threaten to undermine his wife and daughter's plans continually. Papa Willie rebels. The mother and father have violent fights, abusing each other physically and emotionally in front of their six-year-old daughter.

Lark's very name suggests how ludicrous an American childhood can be—how ludicrous, indeed, the attainment of the American Dream can be. The irony of the word "lark," meaning to engage in harmless fun or mischief, becomes apparent as there are not too many times when Lark has fun as an American child.

Mama's bridge club is a symbol of the bridge that Mama crosses to save her sanity with the laughter and camaraderie of her lady friends.



Chapters 2 through 6

Chapters 2 through 6 Summary

In Chapter 2, Mama finishes getting ready for her bridge club gathering and leaves Lark with the "Monkey Wards" (p. 7 and 8) catalog and her fantasies about what takes place on bridge club night. Lark is especially interested in the stories that circulate regarding Hilly Stillman, a wounded World War veteran who went from local hero status to mentally ill in a matter of a few years. One Hilly rumor had one of his mother's young cousins living with them and helping out with baby Hilly, when she got pregnant. This brought shame to the family as the girl was not married. Mrs. Stillman almost lost her job as a third grade teacher. At a sodality meeting, Mama apparently expressed her opinion that she hoped the man was married and gave the girl enough money to get to California, where maybe she made it to the movies. When word circled back to Papa about Mama's feelings, he tells her if she feels that way, then she is no better than the pregnant whore. He slaps her so hard after she swats him with a rolled-up Liberty magazine, that her face is badly bruised.

In Chapter 3, Lark sits down to eat her Hershey bar in her pajamas after her mother leaves for bridge and belittles herself for not having the willpower to make the candy last. When she looks through the house plan booklets that her mother got from the lumberyard, she picks #127—The Cape Ann—and leaves the booklet open on her parents' bed. Papa takes Lark with him, in her pajamas, to Herbie Wendel's house for the poker party. Herbie Wendel gives Lark a red bubble gum jawbreaker, which she eats noisily, disturbing her father's concentration. Papa tells Lark to stop making so much noise, and when she protests that she is trying to learn poker, her father tells her that poker is not a game for kids. Lark falls asleep on the couch in the living room, has a nightmare, and is awakened by Herbie Wendel, who gives her some homemade turtle soup while her father is at the liquor store. Lark's father keeps her out until the break of dawn. When they return home, Mama is waiting at the kitchen table.

In Chapter 4, a terrible fight ensues between Mama and Papa after Mama sends Lark to her crib at 5:30 in the morning. Papa hits Mama with his fists; she swings around and hits his ribs with a Heinz ketchup bottle. Then she grabs a knife and threatens to kill him, in front of Lark, who peeks around the corner. A few hours later, Lark's mother cuts the wad of gum out of her daughter's hair before Lark goes to catechism class. At St. Boniface Catholic Church, Lark sees her friend Sally, whose mother is a convert, just as Lark's Mama. Lark has been keeping a list of her sins so she will not forget them when she goes to her first confession. Lark envies the long, thick braids of Sally's hair. Toward the end of class, Lark asks Sister Mary Clair if gambling is a sin. The sister is careful with her answer because she wonders why the child asks. Lark is happy to report to her mother that Papa will not go to hell if he loses all their money if he confesses and is truly sorry. Lark's mother tells her that Papa lost two hundred dollars, which scares Lark enough that she says, "I felt that I was carrying it around on my back, just as Mama and Papa were," (p. 32).



In Chapter 5, Lark ponders their new home, the down payment, and the money her father lost; she cannot eat her favorite bologna and onion sandwich that her Mama makes for her when she arrives home after catechism class. Instead, she finds the house booklets and dreams of their new home with her dormer window and seat, just like the little boy's in her "Happy Stories for Bedtime" book. Lark looks at the scenery on the banjo clock hanging on the wall next to her crib; she imagines that she has everything she ever dreamed of and she falls asleep. When she awakens, she goes for a walk down the railroad tracks and visits the hobo jungle, which is an exposed basement of a demolished warehouse. She remembers a letter she found there from an Earl Samson to his brother-in-law Bill. The man was traveling, looking for work; Lark and her mother were touched by his written words and her mother kept the letter. Lark walks through the cottonwoods, where the tramps lay in the grass on hot days, shaded by the trees. She searches through the litter for items of interest. Across the trestle bridge, Lark is startled by an unknown man. She runs the other way. He runs after her. She prays, then stumbles and falls to the ground. She looks up to see Hilly Stillman.

In Chapter 6, as Lark and Hilly walk down the tracks toward town, they see an angry Mama marching toward them. Lark wonders if she will get the back of the brush for being late. She thinks about her father getting so angry over her biting her nails that he gives her the brush. Papa has not come back home yet after losing the money, so Mama invites Hilly to dinner. They eat, drive Hilly home, and cruise the streets singing, until they return home to give Lark a bath. Lark shows her mother the plans for the Cape Ann house and her mother cuts out the pages and hangs them near the banjo clock, so they can look at them every day.

Chapters 2 through 6 Analysis

In Chapter 2, Mama's bridge club is a symbol of escape and entertainment for her, which feeds her true soul. Her lightness of being comes from the other women, not her husband. The Tabu perfume that mother wears to bridge club is a symbol to Lark of something she is not able to partake in. The laughter and raucousness of the ladies of bridge club is described as an oxymoron, a "satisfying racket." To Lark, there is safety and comfort in the ladies' voices and she wonders if she will ever have so much to laugh about.

A fantasy theme is carried on by Lark when she wonders what happens at bridge club. Lark lives a vicarious existence, through her mother and the gossip. Lark learns very young to be interested in the gossip behind Hilly Stillman. Mother is a good role model in that she is always kind to Hilly and his mother.

Lark's Mama is prone to indulging in fantasy on many occasions. The instance when she hopes that the pregnant girl was sent to California by a married man and is now in the movies ends up getting her in trouble when the gossip comes back to her husband. He hits her in the face and bruises her so badly she does not attend the sodality meetings anymore. It is ironic how something she enjoys so much—the gossip—turns around and gets her into trouble.



In Chapter 3, Lark is already not happy with who she is. She thinks living in The Cape Ann will make her a better person—one with willpower. She compares herself incessantly to Katherine Albers, a blond girl at her school, who Lark thinks has everything. This seems to signify that Americans are taught at a young age to create their own sadness, blindly reaching for the "American Dream," to make everything better in their lives. Americans tend to ignore the root causes of their daily problems, which causes much stress and happiness.

"Damned old fool charged an arm and a leg," (p. 19). One of the basic rules for effectively writing and creating a work of fiction is to steer clear of cliches. This novel makes much use of the cliché, but the clichés are strictly of an American nature and contribute to the story and character development.

In Chapter 4, The Three Pigs quilt mentioned is an appropriate description, for in the fairy tale, the big bad wolf huffs and puffs and blows the house down. Here, the big bad wolf is similar to Papa.

"It was because of me that Mama and Papa had fought," (p. 22). Here Lark contemplates the more difficult life and times of being six years old, versus five or four. She takes on an inordinate amount of guilt.

Regarding catechism and sin, the fact that Lark does not include her envy of Sally's hair (or anything else) on her sin list is slightly ironic, yet Lark is very innocent and she does not know that envy is a sin. Another religious irony includes the notion that a religious education is so strict and pays so much attention to procedure and memorization that the real meaning of religion is lost. One must come to his or her own conclusions regarding theology.

Tied into the fabric of American life is the worry and concern over what other people think. For instance, the nun wonders why Lark asks about gambling. She wonders if there is Protestant criticism around town regarding their annual church bazaar and the innocent Wheel of Fortune game. She wonders if Father Delias plays poker when he goes fishing. Another instance occurs when Mama wonders if Sister Mary Clair knows that her husband gambled and lost money.

In Chapter 5, Lark lives inside her own imagination, dreaming of all the things that she thinks will make her happy: a new home with a dormer window and seat, a big red tricycle, a tree house, blond curls in her hair, perfect cartwheels and perfect dance steps like Sally Wheeler learns in dance class. Lark's life is an even parallel with the need for escape. She is unable to find happiness mainly due to her parents' highly dysfunctional and abusive relationship.

The banjo clock is both a symbol of escape and a symbol of the passage of time. Papa loses two of the five hundred dollars originally saved for the house down payment; this indicates a longer passage of time before attainment of their American Dream.

It is ironic that, in their quest to live the American Dream, they neglect the root causes of their unhappiness. The American Dream, in essence, becomes a nightmare. There is so



much focus on material things that the important relationships are neglected and destroyed.

In Chapter 6, Mama and Lark's dream house plans hang near the banjo clock, a fitting place to hang their dreams, near the passage of time. The banjo clock is also where Lark often escapes her confusing life.



Chapters 7 through 11

Chapters 7 through 11 Summary

In Chapter 7, Papa returns home; Mama is merely civil to him for weeks. As Mama searches the classified ads for a job of her own, Lark wonders how she will ever find one. After all, since the hobos look every day for work and cannot find any, how could her Mama find anything?

Lark and Mama play a game called "Lady Caller," where Lark pretends to be Mrs. Brown visiting Mrs. Erhardt. After dinner, Lark's Papa takes her out to get ice cream and a dime's worth of gumdrops, which is almost unheard of. Papa tells Lark to keep the gumdrops from her mother, which Lark feels is a breach of the Fourth Commandment to "Honor thy Father and thy Mother." Lark also thinks that her mother's soul may turn as black as coal for disobeying her father when he does not want her to work because it is not pretty and womanly. Lark feels the need to write on her sin list the fact that she wanted to work as a tap dancer. She is further disobeying her father.

In Chapter 8, Lark's mother gives her the picnic tickets to sell for the Knights of Columbus Memorial Day Picnic, much to the disappointment of her daughter. Lark says, "If twenty people bought tickets and one turned me down, the one who turned me down hung around in my mind, haunting me," (p. 57). Lark heads to the Sinclair station and succeeds in selling sixteen tickets, for which she is delighted. When Lark arrives at Sheila Grubb's house, she finds out that Mr. Grubb won a lot of money in poker. The couple bought one of the ugliest blue living room suites Lark has ever seen. Baby, Mrs. Grubb's Pekingese, proceeds to bite holes in Lark's shoes. Lark sits on the curb and cries. When Lark gets home, Papa checks her freshly-chewed fingernails, gets the brush and spansks her. Lark screams so much that Papa takes her someplace no one will hear—the cemetery. Back at home, Mama uses cold compresses, ice and aspirin to soothe the pain on Lark's back, buttocks and thighs. Later, when Papa returns home, he apologizes to his daughter, asks for forgiveness, and tells her that next weekend, he will take her fishing. Lark feigns sleep.

In Chapter 9, Mama's sister, Betty, suffers a difficult pregnancy and Mama wants to take Lark to stay with her after school is out, until the baby arrives in July. Lark's questions about babies are answered with the standard stork response. This confuses Lark and she has nightmares about the stork dropping the baby. Lark's nightmare that evening also includes scenes from the cemetery. The next day, Lark learns that her Mama is learning how to type, which makes the little girl both excited and frightened.

In Chapter 10, Papa takes Lark hunting for night crawler worms. Lark is pleased to mention this outing to her friend, Sally Wheeler, who is disgusted by it. Sally tells Lark about the time her mother hit the Rabel's dog, killing it. Now her mother cries often, to Sally's embarrassment. As the girls prepare to study for catechism, Mrs. Wheeler tearfully tells her story about witnessing a car chase Hilly Stillman through the cemetery,



the passengers tormenting him until Mrs. Wheeler chases them off. Mrs. Wheeler is nervous and sad, Sally is embarrassed and Lark tries to rationalize with and comfort her friend's mother. When Lark returns home, she watches her Mama practice typing and then prepares a bologna sandwich dinner for "Mrs. Brown" and "Mrs. Erhardt." Mrs. Brown tells the Hilly Stillman story related by Mrs. Wheeler.

In Chapter 11, Mama and Lark pay a visit to the Stillmans. They bring ice cream and while Mama and Mrs. Stillman chat, Lark reads a story to Hilly. They leave, not discovering what happened to Hilly in the cemetery.

Chapters 7 through 11 Analysis

In Chapter 7, Life continues to be increasingly confusing for Lark. First of all, she cannot comprehend how her mother will find a job, when the hobos apparently search every day and find nothing to keep them fed. Second, religion and the commission of sin prove extremely anxiety-provoking for young Lark. She continues to list her sins on her sheet of paper so she can remember them at her First Confession.

A new twist on the theme of fantasy arises when Lark plays the game "Lady Caller" with her mother. The concerns that Lark has over her father's gambling, the loss of a down payment, confession, and the bleak job market come out in the role-playing game. Lark is an innocent child who is living through some very difficult and confusing times, mostly due to the personalities and relationships in her life. Lark does not come out and state her concerns, rather, as the young child she is, she plays a game. Nevertheless, her concerns are real.

In Chapter 8, the string of events that occurs during Lark's afternoon makes for a terribly confusing and disappointing end to the day. Lark begins to have thoughts regarding fairness, justice and punishment, although her thoughts are not yet wholly formed. Her childlike innocence is giving way to more rational, mature thoughts. The cemetery is a symbol of the slow death of Lark's innocence.

In Chapter 9, Lark experiences uncontrolled emotions, which surface in her nightmare. For example, the flames in her dream represent her feelings, which spin out of control, for the information that the adults in her life feed her is super-confusing. Lark is haunted by the thought of a baby falling out of the blanket which the stork carries. This foreshadows the events to come at Aunt Betty's.

Irony is found in the reason Lark bites her nails and her punisher. Lark is anxious and nervous over the actions of her parents and her neighbors. When Lark realizes that Mrs. Sheila Grubb was able to splurge on new living room furniture with the money her husband won in poker, Lark knows that it was most likely her father's money that purchased the suite. Lark is also in distress over her shoes, which Mrs. Grubb's dog destroys. It is ironic that her father punishes her so severely for something that stems from his own foolish, selfish actions. Papa takes no responsibility for his own actions.



Lark's mother's typewriter is a symbol of independence, responsibility and a vehicle for achieving success on many different levels.

In Chapter 10, Lark finds happiness in the night crawler outing with her Papa, and when she sees the abundance of worms on the ground, she is reminded of one of her dreams wherein she finds a wealth of coins on the ground. Through Lark's happiness and her connection to the coin dream, she seems to know that the worms have a value. There is a misguided value placed on the worms, i.e. a monetary value that she learns from American society. It is not the tangible monetary value of the worms that matter; the worm's great worth stems from an intangible value—the value of love between a father and daughter. The worms symbolize the priceless value not measured by money.

Lark learns to act more mature when she attempts to take sides with and comfort Mrs. Wheeler after the Hilly Stillman episode.

In Chapter 11, Lark makes a parallel between the mystery of what happened to Hilly and her growing up. "Patches of mystery, like patches of fog, obscured what I ought to know if I were to be ready for seven years old," (p. 81).



Chapters 12 through 16

Chapters 12 through 16 Summary

In Chapter 12, after dinner, Papa takes the brush to Lark again for disobeying his order to stop biting her nails. The next morning, Papa is jolly; Lark is sullen. According to her father, God hates sullen people. Lark feels fortunate that the next Monday—the day of her regularly scheduled weekly nail checkup with her father—is the day before Memorial Day. Thus, she goes with her Mama to set up for the Knights of Columbus picnic. Lark is moved by excitement as she watches the men assemble the merry-go-round.

The girls go swimming and talk about Sally's mother and her nerves. Perhaps Stella Wheeler is going through the change, Mama says. Cynthia Eggers mentions that she bought her daughter Marilyn a new formal gown for the Memorial Day Parade, since Marilyn was Homecoming Queen. Cynthia also mentions that she hopes Hilly Stillman will not make a fool of himself during the parade—how embarrassing to Marilyn. Stella Wheeler asserts herself and says the parade honors war veterans, not homecoming queens. Cynthia stalks off; Stella cries.

In Chapter 13, all attend the Memorial Day Picnic and parade the next day. Hilly Stillman marches well in the parade and heads home afterward. Lark decides to get money from Papa for the carousel before he loses it in the Bingo tent. Beverly Ridza finds Lark and manages to borrow her underpants so the two can go swimming. Beverly impresses Lark with her swimming abilities; Lark is even more impressed when Beverly teaches her how to swim. They become friends, riding the merry-go-round together and eating pie. Lark decides she will be brave enough to swim out to the raft, where she can learn to dive. Lark hardly makes it to the raft; her Mama comes to rescue her in a rowboat. Lark becomes very ill with a fever of one hundred and four degrees and vomiting. Dr. White pays a visit to their home.

In Chapter 14, Lark suffers tonsillitis and Beverly Ridza brings her a get-well present—a coloring book. When Mama goes to school to pick up Lark's report card, they soon find out that Lark got A's in every subject, except for printing, which is an A-. Lark asks if they need to show Papa and her Mama says only if he asks for it. Papa expects straight A's, no minuses. Lark escapes into the banjo clock, her happy place. Talk of plans to build their home resume between Mama and Lark, and Lark asks if her friends Sally, Beverly and Hilly can come over.

In Chapter 15, when Lark returns to health, she and Mama head to Morgan Lake via train to assist Aunt Betty in her difficult pregnancy. At the Weed Lake stop, Lark sees a new and simply elegant lady board the train. Mama befriends the lady, much to the embarrassment, awe and delight of Lark.

In Chapter 16, the elegant lady passenger sits with Lark and Mama, joining them for coffee. The Erhardt ladies discover the reason for the lady's sadness. Her Papa blew



his head off with a shotgun due to financial problems. The woman is returning home from his funeral.

This lady, whose name remains a mystery to the Erhardts, is instrumental in getting Lark to come out of her shell. Lark asks her if she knows Earl Samson. The woman replies, "No."

Chapters 12 through 16 Analysis

In Chapter 12, Lark is continually forced to make sense of this world that she is growing up in with the nonsensical information given to her by the role models in her life. For example, her father tells her that God hates sullen people. Also, Lark's mother has told her that a stork delivers babies, and when the "change" is discussed regarding Stella Wheeler, Lark is forced to use this previous misinformation to make sense of the reasons Mrs. Wheeler cries a lot. This all ties in with the fantasy theme.

The other portion of the fantasy theme is the portion that Lark chooses for herself. As she watches the assembly of the merry-go-round, she says, "Simply witnessing its assembly, I was overcome. The merry-go-round was part of the land beyond the larkspur and hollyhocks, in the banjo clock. But it was a part capable of passing from that Elysian field to this world of heat and dust. And while I rode, it carried me with it into the valley of dreams," (p. 84). The carousel is the ultimate symbol of escape for Lark.

In Chapter 13, Lark gains the ability to become a forward thinker. This is apparent when she thinks to get money from her father before he loses it all in Bingo. Indirectly, she learns that gambling is an activity in which she most likely will not engage. Lark learns something positive from Papa's bad habit and compulsion. Lark also gains the ability to see beyond a person's outward appearance. This is evident as Beverly Ridza, who is quite poor, befriends Lark by giving her the intangible gift of successful swimming lessons. Lark sees the value in this friendship.

A hard lesson is learned when Lark pushes her swimming limits to head out to the raft. The raft is a symbol to Lark that she should not be in such a hurry; she should not push herself too far beyond her new abilities. The raft is a sign of caution; Lark should wait, just as she is forced to wait until she is healthy again to go visit her pregnant aunt. Lark is in transition from thinking like a child, that she has to catch that baby before the stork drops it, and thinking rationally with solid, true knowledge.

In Chapter 14, Lark escapes again into the scenery of the banjo clock, where she finds happy roller skates this time. The roller skates symbolize movement and freedom, away from the strict rules of her father. Beverly's gift is a true sign of friendship; Lark recognizes this as such. Beverly had to come up with a little money of her own to purchase the coloring book and Lark appreciates the extra effort made by Bev. Lark still believes, innocently, that a home of their own will solve all the world's problems, especially Sally's worries, Hilly's perceived unhappiness, and Beverly's ability to take a



bath in a real tub. Lark's ability to bathe in a real tub will be made available in the new house as well.

In Chapter 15, "... gazing out at the half dozen dusty, unpaved streets crisscrossing each other," (p. 111), the dusty, unpaved streets symbolize the young mind, life and journey of Lark. The dust signifies the lack of clarity Lark experiences on so many of life's issues. The roads symbolize the journey Lark takes from the fantasies of childhood to the reality of what it means to grow up. Lark travels the unpaved roads, which are called life. Lark learns from her mother how to relinquish her childhood shyness when she witnesses Mama talking to the elegant new passenger.

In Chapter 16, regarding Americana, the Erhardts discover the woman has a radio show and they are starstruck, which is initially a superficial way to react. They learn how to care deeply, showing sympathy toward the woman whose father committed suicide. The woman validates the lesson Lark's Mama shared. "They [shy people] pretend. They sympathize. Once you understand that almost everyone is as shy as you, and that they're hoping you'll say something first, you begin to feel ... powerful. You have the power to make them easy. ... It makes you feel grown-up," (p. 119). Here, Lark learns that being grown-up is a state of mind, a feeling.



Chapters 17 through 20

Chapters 17 through 20 Summary

Chapter 17 brings Lark and Mama arriving at Aunt Betty's house to witness utter disarray and filth. The two jump to attention and create order and cleanliness out of the chaos. On Lark's way to the grocer's, she suddenly becomes scared of a ghost story her grandfather recounted about a woman named Lena Bauer. Fear grips her, she sits down and "falls asleep" on Main Street. At Esterly's Groceries and General Merchandise, Lark and Mama learn that Betty and Stan Weller do not pay their bills. This worries Lark so much that she feels she needs to make a list and number her worries.

In Chapter 18, while Lark is tucked in on the Weller's couch at night, she overhears Mama and Aunt Betty's conversation, and feels unsettled to hear her mother unsure over what may happen in their life. When Lark awakens, she heads directly to the bathroom, her fear of the dark keeping her on a straight and narrow path. The six-year-old thinks of many things: her Papa looking at the same night sky stars as she; the German woman next door, who she imagines is a go-getter like Mama; Grandma Browning and her Maytag washing machine. Mama hangs laundry outside, wearing heels so the neighbors will think the Browning sisters are classy. When the neighbor's sheets are dry and ironed, Mama sends Lark to return them to the German woman. Lark is not happy.

In Chapter 19, Aunt Betty is very sick, yet she refuses to allow Mama to pay for a doctor. Lark sits on the back step, watching for the stork. When Lark sees that her nails are growing, she runs inside to tell her Mama, only to be turned away because Mama is bathing Aunt Betty. Lark sees the pregnant belly and can tell why her aunt is so sick to her stomach. Perhaps, Lark thinks, she needs to pass wind; "What if Aunt Betty exploded?" (p. 143). The sisters argue, saying hurtful things to one another. Lark walks down the street, sits in front of Boomer's Tavern, and worries about the neighbor lady hearing and feeling scared that life may not be what it seems on the surface with her Mama. A man resembling Santa Claus buys Lark an ice cream and he and Mr. Boomer validate the stork story for Lark. She leaves with Santa (Mr. McPhee) to deliver freight from the train. The last delivery is made to Mrs. Kraus, who turns out to be the German Woman next door. When Lark returns to Aunt Betty's, the mother-to-be's health is in further decline.

In Chapter 20, Lark narrates a story about Princess Elizabeth, Prince Stanley, Princess Ann (the new baby, in Lark's mind) and the wicked witch living next door to their castle. The fairy tale ends happily with the wicked witch burning up in her own bad temper after her plans are foiled. When Mama returns, she tells Lark what a witch the German Woman is. She asks for money to make the long distance call to the doctor when Mama's sister lies dying. Mama cries.



Chapters 17 through 20 Analysis

In Chapter 17, in Lark's childish imagination, one thought can trigger intense fear. This fear becomes larger than life when she remembers the ghost story of Lena Bauer. She actually passes out on Main Street. When she awakens, she naively thinks she fell asleep.

"Poverty made me feel weak, as if I were coming down with an awful, debilitating, communicable disease—the disease of being without money" (p. 134). Set in the Depression, Lark learns early on about the problems that lack of money can cause. It is inevitable that these adult worries seep into her being. Mama, however, is a fairly good role model for Lark on how to correct this kind of problem.

A tool that Lark uses to deal with the confusion of life, in this case her worries, is the list. Whether she knows this or not, it is a healthy way to deal with the problems in life. The act of writing the worries down on paper helps her to not internalize them as much.

In Chapter 18, Lark is, once again, forced to confront her own shyness at the neighbor's house. Here, Lark notices that looks can be deceiving; the outside of the house, "... sheathed in shining white clapboard ..." (p. 142), is not consistent with the inside of the house, "... dark and full of warning" (p. 142).

In Chapter 19, Lark takes a more grown-up role in caring for her aunt while her mother goes next door to call the doctor. Lark has trouble seeing her aunt sick, for she is usually a woman who laughs a lot and tells funny stories. "If she were well, she would weave silly tales about the widow Kraus, plucking that woman's stinger so we could look at her without fear and dread" (p. 154). Lark decides she will tell her aunt a story.

In Chapter 20, Lark sees her mother's fear, which intensifies hers.



Chapters 21 through 26

Chapters 21 through 26 Summary

In Chapter 21, Aunt Betty's illness worsens. Mama feels extremely upset because she is at a loss over what to do and she lashes out at Lark. Mama cries. Lark brainstorms the ways she can contribute to Aunt Betty's welfare; her lookout for the stork, she feels, is instrumental. Lark feels an intuition that the kolache lady may be able to cure her aunt. When Lark revisits the kolache lady, Maria Zelena agrees to call upon the mother-to-be.

In Chapter 22, Maria Zelena comes over to Aunt Betty's with her healing potions in Chapter 22. Lark is sent away by her mother, much to her great disappointment. Uncle Stan returns home and Mama breaks the news about his wife to him. Mama tells Lark that it is always up to her to do everything.

Mama cannot disguise the disgust she feels for Uncle Stan in Chapter 23. Lark overhears the wicked witch next door making love with someone, although she does not fully understand what they are doing. Lark thinks that perhaps the wicked witch killed the man. Next, Uncle Stan walks from the neighbor's house toward home when he hears his wife's screams. Betty delivers a stillborn baby girl. Poor Lark feels guilty because she did not catch the baby when the stork dropped her.

In Chapter 24, Mama and Uncle Stan exchange bitter words and feelings. Uncle Stan retreats to his garage where he lies on a piece of broken down cardboard, like a hobo in the jungle.

The families attend Marjorie Ann Weller's funeral in Chapter 25. Lark cannot contain her outrageous crying and her mother admonishes her. Lark prefers that her mother give her the brush because she would feel better. Every glance, every external cue turns into an accusation to Lark for killing the baby.

In Chapter 26, the funeral attendees eat lunch and dinner at the gathering in the home of Uncle Stan and Aunt Betty. Uncle Stan and Lark's Papa are missing and do not return until 4:30 the next morning. Mama is angry because she knows they have been drinking.

Chapters 21 through 26 Analysis

"There were times now when Mama's fear made her seem like a little girl" (p. 159). At this revelation in Chapter 21, Lark begins to see uncontrolled emotion as a sign of childhood. This is a milestone in her growth and she starts to think in terms of how she, herself, can help the situation. Lark acts through her sense of growing intuition and intellect when she ponders the mysteriously magical kolache lady, Maria. The six-year-old overcomes some of her shyness, visits Maria and her Papa, and knows innately it is



the right thing to do. Lark also learns to apply the lessons of sympathy; she thinks of another person instead of thinking about herself.

In Chapter 22, religion and God are still a source of immense confusion for Lark. The sisters tell her that magic is a sin; she fears that she sins when she asks Maria to come over. Lark suffers a headache as she wraps her brain around why God would not prefer people to perform magic for the good of the world. She remembers that God is a jealous God, yet jealousy is a sin. It is not fair that God expects us to be perfect. Lark slowly comes to her own conclusions regarding religion, as most adults do.

Aunt Betty's baby is born dead in Chapter 23. Mama is distraught. Lark wishes Mama would say something to her regarding how happy she is to have her daughter. Instead, Mama is distant and talks to Lark like she is not her own daughter. This hurts Lark's feelings, yet she will have to learn to recover and understand the gravity of death and its effect on the living. The limbo mentioned in this chapter is a parallel to Lark's current position in life. She is not exactly a child, nor an adult. She is somewhere toward the middle of her journey in her loss of innocence.

In Chapter 24, Lark fears for the whole family when she sees Uncle Stan lie down in the garage with tears on his eyelashes. Her instinct is to think that they may end up a homeless family. This is another foreshadowing element.

In Chapter 25, Lark still operates with the fantasy that a stork brings a baby. She feels like it is her fault that baby Marjorie is dead. She craves punishment for her crime but cannot bear to tell her Mama what she has done, for her shame is so great. At the gravesite, Lark is reminded of the foreshadowing hole in her dream yet she still does not understand the gravesite is not for her. "Mindful of the dream in which I'd tumbled into such a pit as this, I backed away, a stone bench beckoning," (p. 182).



Chapters 27 through 32

Chapters 27 through 32 Summary

In Chapter 27, Papa and Uncle Stan return with a story about running out of gas after the stations were closed. They are admonished by their respective parents and wives. Mama can hardly believe her ears when Papa tells her he lost \$450 playing poker.

The Browning family put together a plan in Chapter 28 for Aunt Betty and Uncle Stan to get financially back on their feet. The plan entails sending Stan to California to look for work since there are no jobs where they currently live. Betty hates the idea because she will be separated from her husband. Betty and Arlene get into a physical fight.

In Chapter 29, McPhee buys Lark an ice cream from Boomers Tavern, finds out Lark is leaving Monday to stay with her grandparents Browning while Mama helps Aunt Betty pack and sell her things.

McPhee and Lark visit Maria Zelena to find out if baby Marjorie was baptized. Lark wants to make sure the baby went to heaven. Maria contradicts catechism class knowledge, saying only a crazy God would keep an innocent baby out of heaven. Maria tells Lark not to believe everything she hears. Lark runs out of Maria's, thinking the woman a heretic.

Mama carries on with the plans, in Chapter 30, to get Betty and Stan back on their feet. Betty tries to tell her sister she is not ready to leave their house and the baby yet. The sisters show love and disagreement toward one another, proving that people may disagree and still love each other.

In Chapter 31, Lark leaves Aunt Betty's to head to her maternal grandparents' house on Blue Lake. Lark pulls off in the train alone, waving to her Mama on the platform.

At the Browning's residence in Chapter 32, Mama congratulates Lark for not biting her nails and tells her she can buy a bottle of nail polish when they get home. Their home is a catastrophe when they arrive. Papa never cleaned up his dirty dishes, emptied the slop pails or ashtray. Lark and Mama clean up the mess. When Papa arrives home, he and Mama immediately begin to argue over the mess, over the lost money. Papa leaves, slamming the door. Lark notices their Oldsmobile is no longer in the parking lot and Mama realizes he has sold it. Lark has bitten her nails again but she decides to paint them anyway, from her fingertips all the way to the first knuckle. She then pours the rest of the bottle on Papa's chair.

Chapters 27 through 32 Analysis

In Chapter 27, Lark sees the tables reversed on her father in this chapter. Grandma and Grandpa Erhardt scold Willie for what he has done. Likewise, the Wellers scold Uncle



Stan. Lark's father and uncle are brought down to a child-like level, which Lark witnesses. This helps eliminate some of the hierarchy in the parent-child relationship, helping Lark to grow and see that she is not so different from her parents after all. Papa's loss of more money than their savings for the new house is the beginning of the culmination of the foreshadowing that Lark picked up on when Uncle Stan looked like he was in the hobo jungle. Lark's ability to use her instincts like this is a sign that she is growing up.

In Chapter 29 Maria exposes a truth regarding religion to young Lark. Lark will, no doubt, think more rationally about her religious teachings, once she gets over this initial shock.

In Chapter 30, Lark witnesses her mother and aunt disagreeing and loving one another simultaneously, in a healthy way.

As Lark heads to Blue Lake alone in Chapter 31, her heart is heavy with the guilt of killing baby Marjorie. The American Stork fairy tale, not grounded in reality in the least, continues to turn into a nightmare for innocent young Lark.

In Chapter 32, the bitterness between Mama and Papa continues its devastating effect on Lark. The six-year-old crosses a threshold, mentally, after she crosses the physical threshold to their home. Lark no longer holds her feelings and fears inside, by worrying and then escaping into the fantasy of the banjo clock. Lark pours the rest of her nail polish onto Papa's chair. This act symbolizes Lark's coming out and her realization that she cannot keep beating herself up over the faults of her father. Lark loses some more of her innocence, in a positive way. She understand who is to blame for bad behaviors and how those behaviors affect her.



Chapters 33 through 38

Chapters 33 through 38 Summary

In Chapter 33, September and back-to-school roll around quickly for Lark and she continues her friendships with Sally and Beverly. She attends the church bazaar, which is similar to the Knights of Columbus picnic. She and her Mama call upon the Stillmans, bringing a pumpkin pie. They notice something very different with Hilly's demeanor and personality, yet they do not know what is happening. Perhaps, they think, he is regaining his sanity.

Papa gives up trying to get Lark to be feminine and not bite her nails in Chapter 34. Instead, he turns to studying catechism with her, as a symbol of her piety, while Mama is at bridge club. Papa tries to tell Lark that she needs to fear God and love God, which Lark feels is too difficult. Her Papa tells her that she fears and loves him, her earthly father. If she did not fear him, she would lie and steal all the time. This upsets Lark and she denies the allegations. Lark says she is good because she loves Mama. This upsets her father and he wants to know if Lark still loves him.

In Chapter 35, Hilly seems to be regaining his sanity and when Lark and her mother drop by to deliver his Christmas presents, the situation is awkward. Lark longs for her old friend Hilly.

In Chapter 36, at Lark's house for catechism study, Beverly divulges that she wants a gun for Christmas so she can shoot her good-for-nothing father. Beverly further divulges that Santa does not exist.

Beverly and Lark hurt Sally's feelings in Chapter 37 by laughing hard over a joke. The girls remain confused over the episode. When Lark is at home, her father reads her sin list.

In Chapter 38, Sally holds a grudge against Lark and Beverly; the girls cannot understand why Sally still holds onto her anger. Mama makes confession dresses for the girls, delivers them and then settles down with Lark at home, perusing the house booklets. They revisit The Cape Ann.

Chapters 33 through 38 Analysis

In Chapter 33, Lark feels a new sense of urgency about becoming an adult. Lark has already experienced much pain and poverty as a child and she is ready to escape it. This time, her method of escape is to think that adulthood may cure her ills. She does not think to escape by method of the banjo clock fantasy. Lark experiences more consistency in her life, for example the church bazaar, which is a function like the Knights of Columbus picnic. Lark becomes comfortable in her role as server of desserts and is able to take on increasingly "adult" responsibilities.



Lark's father seems to have reached a turning point in his life with his family in Chapter 34. He spends time with Lark studying catechism and feels sorry at the thought of his daughter not loving him. He cries. Papa's motivations for strict and fearful parenting of Lark most likely stem from his childhood and the way he was parented.

In Chapter 36, the fairy tale of Santa Claus is revealed as a lie to Lark. This is a pretty major turning point in her young life, and she wonders what else may be a lie. Is God even real?

Lark reacts emotionally over her father reading her sin list in Chapter 37, which is supposed to remain private. Papa belittles Lark.



Chapters 39 through 42

Chapters 39 through 42 Summary

In Chapter 39, Lark's parents have another ferocious argument, each threatening to kill the other. Lark goes to her First Confession and learns that she did not kill baby Marjorie. She practically floats from the room, she is so happy.

Lark takes her First Communion in Chapter 40 and she is overjoyed. She feels she enters into a part of her parents' world.

At the Majestic Movie Theater in Chapter 41, Lark's Mama wins the two hundred and fifty dollar grand prize at the 1940 Bank Nite. She opens a typing service business and calculates by the time Lark is in the fourth grade, The Cape Ann will be in the process of being built.

In Chapter 42, Lark, for the first time in awhile, steps back into the banjo clock for a fantasy escape from the news that Aunt Betty and Uncle Stan may get a divorce.

Chapters 39 through 42 Analysis

In Chapter 39, Lark's father finds the religion in his life; however he twists it to get his way, sort of like a manipulative child would.

In Chapter 40, "We had made it. We were one of them [their parents]. More than Confirmation, First Communion brought us into Christ's circle of light, a circle our parents had known for so long, I wondered if they hadn't grown used to it," (p. 243).

Lark can honestly say that she loves God now. The power to forgive her sins has left her at peace, with no more anxiety and worry of yesterday. She also feels closer to being grown-up, as she has ceremoniously moved through a childhood milestone, leaving some of the confusion of innocence behind her and moving forward, as an enlightened soul. The above quote indicates that Lark sees the error of her parents' ways. They continue to sin because they know they can ask for forgiveness, and if they are truly sorry, they will be forgiven.

Mama wins two hundred and fifty dollars in Chapter 41, which gives the Erhardts a head start on saving the down payment for their new home. Mama is determined to make the dream a reality. We see the rise of women in the work place and that the independence and money that goes along with hard work is equivalent to prosperity.

In Chapter 42, the word divorce is as scary as the word death to Lark. She is getting ready to deal with some very serious issues in life.



Chapters 43 through 49

Chapters 43 through 49 Summary

In Chapter 43, Lark takes stock of what she has learned to date. In Kindergarten, she learns to negotiate for desirable things and listen when others speak of things that do not interest her. In First Grade, she learns to read and go through her first confession. Second Grade brings addition and subtraction and Third Grade will eventually bring longhand writing. Lark writes Hilly a letter and vice versa. They both feel quite important receiving mail addressed to them. They correspond weekly. Lark and Mama go visit the Browning grandparents to check on Aunt Betty, who is suspected of having an affair with a married man named Mr. Miller. Grandma is ashamed of Betty's behavior. She says, "Fouling her own nest, that's what she's doing," (p. 261). Arlene does not know what this means.

Mama and Aunt Betty go to a dance in Chapter 44, as married women without their husbands. For Grandma Browning, this is simply unheard of. In Chapter 45, Betty and Arlene go shopping in Minneapolis and when they return, Aunt Betty is hemorrhaging profusely.

In Chapter 46, Aunt Betty worsens before she gets better. Lark is told to keep the situation a secret. She tells a white lie about Aunt Betty having the measles, just as her Mama instructed.

The Japanese bomb Pearl Harbor in Chapter 47 and Hilly dies in Chapter 48.

In Chapter 49, the truth comes out about how Hilly commits suicide. He shoots himself in the mouth. Lark's Mama is shocked, saddened and angry. Lark is so shocked that she cannot even think; she is numb. Mama makes plans for a Methodist minister to speak at the funeral because the priest refuses, saying that suicide is a mortal sin. Papa thinks Hilly was dangerous all along; he also thinks no one will show for the funeral and reception afterward at Bernice McGivern's.

Chapters 43 through 49 Analysis

Anyone with parents knows there will always be a parent-child relationship, no matter the ages. There will also be a generation gap and information not understood by the children. In Chapter 43, the expression "Fouling her own nest" is an example of this. Lark will see this as permission for her to be who she will be; she will grow and develop her own ideas about how she wants to live her life.

In Chapter 45, Grandma and her magic tea remind Lark of Maria Zelena, whom she wronged. "My knowledge of the universe was so small. How would I ever learn enough to survive?" (p. 275) Lark asks. The truth is that we never learn everything there is to know. When Lark learns this, she will be on her way to becoming an adult.



Betty is bleeding because she has terminated a pregnancy. While the chapters so far do not disclose Betty's exact condition, we learn in Chapter 46 that she bleeds excessively and runs a fever. Lark learns to keep some family things private, utilizing the discretion of adults.

Lark's friend dies in Chapter 47. In Chapter 48, "For once, I couldn't cry, I who wept at the death of ladybugs. My body was as heavy as a locomotive, but my mind was as vacant as an empty boxcar. Nothing was worth thinking. I didn't want to think anymore" (p. 286); Lark is numb, she begins to grieve, though she does not understand the process yet.



Chapters 50 through 51

Chapters 50 through 51 Summary

Lark refuses to go to the church that refuses to bury Hilly in Chapter 50. Her Papa slaps her and she bites his hand, down to the bone. He slaps her with his other hand and makes her go to church, where later she sneaks out and goes to the place where Hilly died. She enters Mrs. Stillman's place and sees Mrs. Wheeler there. Mrs. Wheeler recounts the cemetery story where Axel Nelson and two younger men harm Hilly. When Mrs. Wheeler see them, Hilly has only a shirt on.

Mrs. Wheeler thinks she wants to kill Axel Nelson in Chapter 51; however Mrs. Stillman brings her to her senses. Lark sleeps over at Mrs. Stillman's house; she feels very close to Hilly. She dreams that he stands at the foot of his bed wearing his Army uniform.

Chapters 50 through 51 Analysis

In Chapter 50, Lark breaks free from her father's reins and follows her own heart and emotions. She needs to grieve and express her emotions. The strong feelings she experiences are hers alone and no one else's.

In Chapter 51, the elderly and wise Mrs. Stillman explains to Lark that she will be lonely without Hilly; however, it is better than him being lonely without her. Her wise words help Lark through her grief.



Chapters 52 through 53

Chapters 52 through 53 Summary

Aunt Betty walks Lark home from school in Chapter 52 and the talk turns to the question of whether Hilly went to heaven. Aunt Betty is honest in her answer. She says she does not know. Lark is determined to never return to the Catholic Church and threatens to run away. At home after dinner, a hobo knocks on the door seeking a meal. Aunt Betty feeds him, packs some food for him and sends him on his way. Papa tells Lark he is sad that his daughter will be going to hell for feeling the way she does about the Catholic Church. Lark tells him maybe they will both be going to hell together. Papa is in disbelief, yet he does not turn angry; he flees for his work office.

In Chapter 53, a mysterious officer—a captain—attends Hilly's funeral and becomes the main topic of conversation for awhile. No one knows him and everyone wonders who he is. Later, Papa threatens to not cosign for the new home and Mama asks Betty why she thinks Willie is so against the new house. Betty tells her he thinks she loves the new house more than she loves him. Mama laughs. Before bed, Lark prays that God will let Hilly come to her in a dream.

Chapters 52 through 53 Analysis

As life begins to make more sense to Lark in Chapter 52 and as her confidence in herself and her beliefs grows, she stands up for what she thinks is right. Hilly simply cannot be in hell right now and Lark decides she will not go to a church that says he is in hell. Aunt Betty speaks honestly and openly to Lark. She speaks to Lark as if she were a grown-up. Lark recognizes this and yearns for the lies of childhood. Lark feels the power of her convictions when she tells her Papa he may end up in hell, too. It is Lark's turn to teach her father a lesson.

In Chapter 53, Papa resists the changes happening to his wife and family; no one can figure out why he still has no interest in owning a home. As Lark grieves for Hilly, she wonders the answers to many questions that adults still may ask over death and the afterlife. The walls of the gap between childhood and being a grown-up get closer and closer, for no one knows the answers to what happens after death. Only the dead know.



Chapters 54 through 59

Chapters 54 through 59 Summary

Mama brings a Christmas tree home and the ladies decorate in Chapter 54. Papa heads to a railroad meeting. In Chapter 55, Papa does not come home that night because of a poker party. He loses \$500. Arlene decides to leave him and head to California in January with Betty and Lark.

In Chapter 56, Mama tells Papa to get their train tickets to California. Lark and Mama get passes to travel because Papa works for the railroad. Mama will sell her car to pay for Aunt Betty's ticket. Papa threatens to kill himself and asks how Arlene would feel. She says she thinks it unusual, especially after he says that Hill went to hell for doing the same thing. Papa threatens to kill Arlene with a knife; she says she would rather die than stay. Mama says that when she gets the tickets, she will give Papa the five hundred dollars to pay his debt. Lark does not want to go and her mother simply lets Lark decide what she wants to do. Mama ties up the loose ends before they leave. Lark talks to her friends and Mrs. Stillman about her move to California. Mrs. Stillman talks about her cousin in California who wants the elderly woman to come visit. Lark still grieves the loss of Hilly and goes to his room to reach out to him any way she can.

Mama and Papa both wonder about the other's true intentions in Chapter 57. Will Mama leave? Will Papa kill her? No one knows for sure. Papa does indeed acquire the tickets and Mama promises to get the five hundred dollars out of the bank the next day. Mama and Lark attend farewell parties thrown by their various friends and associates. When Lark's friends fantasize about living in California, Lark wishes they would stop. She is reminded of something her Grandma Browning said, "Don't wish your life away." She thinks her friends are wishing her life away. Papa takes Lark for a farewell drive and reiterates his thought that Mama will not really leave. Lark feels cautiously happy. The next day, Papa sees them off.

In Blue Lake, at Grandma's house, Mama gets to hear opinions opposed to her own in Chapter 58. Grandma tries to talk Arlene out of going to California, every chance she gets.

In Chapter 59, the next morning, a blizzard of snow and drifts covers the land, roads and houses. Arlene and Betty shovel snow all morning. The two women decide to go downtown for some girl time and Lark stays with Grandma and plays in the snow. Grandma wonders, out loud to Lark, when it will all end. Grandma thought she knew the world and she thought she knew her daughter. When Betty and Arlene return from town, they have had their hair done. Mama's is hennaed to a color that makes Grandma think she looks like a streetwalker. Arlene stomps to a bedroom and does not come down for dinner.



The next morning, Grandma tells Lark that when two people argue and split up, sometimes a child can reunite them. Lark brainstorms. She tells her Mama if she goes to California, then Lark will die. Lark hits her mother with her fists, telling her that she hates her.

At the depot, Lark sees her Papa and runs to him. Mama is frozen. Papa pleads with her to come home. He has found a house to put an offer on, and he wants her to come back home. Lark pleads with her Mama. She says that if they live in the Linden house, they would be their best selves. Mama refuses to change her plan. They leave.

Chapters 54 through 59 Analysis

"Horrorified, I climbed into the crib. This was the day the world ended, I thought," (p. 314).

Papa discloses some very real reasons in Chapter 56 for his bad behavior. He does not think Mama cares, so ironically, like a child, he acts out by playing poker and fighting.

Lark really wants to stay in Harvester, even if they have to live in the depot. She is shocked when her mother gives her the choice to stay or go. Mama treats Lark as a grown-up but Lark has trouble with the whole scenario. Lark needs to face some very real fears, which will give her more character and style as she grows up, according to Mrs. Stillman.

In Chapter 57, "Wouldn't you think, after all these years together, that we would know each other better than that? We were dumbfounded to learn what strangers we were" (p. 321). The irony in many families is captured by the above quote. Circumstances and events can change people, so much so, that even after living together for so long, one does not know one's significant other and family members. Also, people seem to get so caught up in what they are doing, they lose sight of everyone closest to them. Lark longs for someone to ask her to stay. It seems ironic that her father is the one who wishes them to stay; he has kept his feelings hidden for a long time. Men traditionally are the bread winners during the time frame of this novel. Papa thinks it is enough to bring home the money; he does not concern himself with his actual relations.

Arlene's mother asks her an important question in Chapter 58, "... did you love and respect Willie?" Arlene says that she tried. This conversation with her mother sheds some light on the real reasons for the marital problems. It is time for Arlene (and Willie) to look at the root causes of their unhappiness. They need to sympathize with one another and show that they care for one another, according to Grandma. They need to accept that they will have to take the miserable with the good. This is Grandma's rather old fashioned view of married life, nevertheless, it has validity. The child in Arlene will have to come to terms with who she is and what she wants to do in life.

In Chapter 59, Grandma discloses to Lark that she herself does not know much of anything anymore. She feels like her daughter and the world are both strange to her. Lark sees that the search for knowledge is a continuous process. Growing into an adult is a continuous process that will feel like it begins over and over again. It is unclear why

Mama refuses to go back with Papa at this point. Nevertheless, she sticks to her guns and aims for California.



Chapter 60

Chapter 60 Summary

On the train, Lark begins the "Lady Caller" game with Mrs. Erhardt. She opens up with her concerns over leaving her husband back home. Mrs. Erhardt tells Mrs. Brown that "... being married was like having a hippopotamus sitting on my face, ... No matter how hard I pushed or which way I turned. I couldn't get up. I couldn't even breathe" (p. 342). Lark does not understand. However, she senses the sincerity in what Mrs. Erhardt says. Mrs. Brown says that the trip to California is a long one. Perhaps she will figure out what to do in the meantime.

Chapter 60 Analysis

Lark, as the young child she still is, resorts to fantasy and playing games to overcome her fears and gain more knowledge. In fact, Lark pretends to act grown-up when she plays this game. In the end, Lark has more knowledge and less misinformation with which to navigate her "growing up." Lark, who is only about ten years old here, still lives her life through her mother. We see that Arlene is still growing, much in the same way as her daughter. There is a parallel throughout the novel between adults and children alike. With all of the uncertainties in life, one thing is for certain: people are always experiencing growth of some kind, no matter the age. In this respect, the "growing up" gap between mother and daughter is closing.



Characters

Lark Ann Browning Erhardt

Lark Ann Browning Erhardt is the six-year-old main character of *The Cape Ann* who suffers many psychological growing pains as she sorts through the complexities of her life. She loses some of the fairy tale innocence of childhood and begins her growth into a young lady, capable of using a discerning eye to figure out the truth of what it means to grow up. Flanked on one side by a strict, controlling father who uses spanking as a means of punishment, and on the other by a mother whose angry emotions toward her father get the best of her on many occasions, Lark is left with bearing the burdens of her parents' problems. Her anxiety gets the best of her and she unconsciously bites her nails, down to the quick sometimes. Lark beats herself up for the issues her parents need to address.

Lark begins her school life with that all-American notion of fairy tales. From the stork bringing babies to earth, to Santa Claus and the Easter Bunny, Lark must learn to comprehend her life on the basis of information from outrageous tales. The American childhood quickly becomes a nightmare for young Lark when she feels responsible for killing her newborn cousin, Baby Marjorie. Religion is at once confusing and anxiety-provoking for Lark when she thinks of all the sins she has committed and then documented on her sin list for her First Confession. The Catholic religion soon proves to be a saving grace for Lark when she learns she is not the one at fault for the baby's death. At her First Confession, she is forgiven for all of her sins and she begins life anew.

Lark slowly builds a proper sense of self-esteem through her friend Hilly, who comes back mentally ill from the World War. Lark learns to use the power of her own convictions when she stands up for what she believes is right. Hilly did not go to hell; a heart as tender as his went to heaven. Lark decides she will not go back to the Catholic Church after the priest refuses to perform Hilly's funeral service because Hilly committed the mortal sin of suicide.

In the end of the novel, Lark leaves with her Mama and her Aunt Betty to travel to California for good. Lark realizes that she is not so different from her adult parents. They sin and sometimes do not know what to do in certain situations. They also grow, as she does, through their experiences.

Arlene Erhardt (Mama)

Arlene Erhardt (Mama) is a fiercely independent woman who realizes she may not like to be married after all. Mama is at once headstrong, yet has a kind heart. She seems to know who she is on the outside but in the end, she gets rather confused about whether she makes the right decision in heading to California with her young daughter and



sister. Arlene is a product of how her parents raised her, yet she is also a product of American society in general. She seems to believe in the pursuit of life, liberty and happiness, as set forth in the Declaration of Independence. She is willing to work to get ahead in life, as she embraces her independence and desires a better life for herself and for Lark. Mama is capable and confident on most occasions and, the majority of the time, she is a good role model for a young girl growing up in a world as confusing and dangerous as the world of Depression-era America. In the end, on her trip to California, she is less confident that she makes the right decision for her daughter. Time will remain her saving grace.

Willie Erhardt (Papa)

Willie Erhardt (Papa) is a father who seems to be a product of his upbringing. Papa is unhappy in his life and marriage and continues to become less happy the more independence his wife attains. He is at once strict and controlling when it comes to Lark; he attempts to control Mama and when he cannot, he becomes enraged. Papa is not a strong character, although he thinks he is physically strong when he beats and abuses the women in his life. He is weak on an emotional level and he does not have the skills to relate with his family in a healthy way. Papa is actually the cause of Lark's self-destructive behavior when she bites her nails. Papa seems to be lazily content and selfish, wanting to get his own way, by doing nothing in order to grow and build a better life for his family. Toward the end, he seems to understand why he has chosen to perform the bad behavior of gambling and losing hard-earned money. He does it because he feels that no one loves and respects him. He is like a child himself, acting in a negative manner to get the attention he so craves.

Hillyard Stillman (Hilly)

Hilly becomes Lark's best friend and has taught her a great deal about life and death. Hilly comes back from the World War with severely limited mental capabilities, yet he teaches Lark much about growing up, expressing and feeling sympathy, and grieving the loss of a loved one.

Mrs. Stillman

Mrs. Stillman is Hilly's elderly mother. She is most wise and helps Lark through her difficult period of grief.

Aunt Betty Weller

Lark's maternal aunt is hopelessly in love with Stanley Weller. During her pregnancy, she is bedridden and extremely ill. Aunt Betty delivers a stillborn baby girl who she names Marjorie. Betty then has an affair with a married man, terminates a pregnancy, and remains with Arlene and Lark for the remainder of the novel.



Uncle Stanley Weller

Uncle Stan is married to Betty, Arlene's sister. He suffers financial difficulties and the way he deals with his stress and problems is to have an affair with the German Woman, the Widow Kraus, next door. He heads to California to look for work, secures a job at a movie studio and never calls for his wife to join him.

Beverly Ridza

Lark becomes great friends with Beverly after the outspoken, gregarious little girl teaches her to swim at the Knights of Columbus Memorial Day Picnic. Beverly is very poor, living with her mother and siblings when Lark meets her. After Beverly's mother gets a job, the family's life and lifestyle improve.

Sally Wheeler

Lark considers Sally one of her good friends. This relationship stems first from the envy Lark feels for Sally's nice house and other material things. Lark learns that Sally's mother is sad and cries a lot, showing Lark that a nice home, on the outside, does not make happiness.

Mrs. Stella Wheeler

Mrs. Wheeler is Sally's mother. She has a difficult time dealing with many things in life because her "nerves" are not as strong as those of others. Her daughter remains embarrassed by her mother's incessant tears.

Bernice McGivern

Bernice is one of Mama's best friends and a member of the bridge club. She helps with Hilly's funeral and hosts the reception afterward at her house.

Axel Nelson

Mr. Nelson owns the Harvester Arms hotel and he is identified by Mrs. Wheeler as the older man with the two younger men who torment and harm Hilly in the cemetery.

Mr. Navarin

Mr. Navarin owns the Sinclair station, where Lark goes to sell picnic tickets.



Sheila Grubb

Lark attempts to sell tickets to her, finds out her husband won a lot of money in poker, and realizes this woman bought the ugliest living room furniture with her father's gambling losses.

Earl Samson

This is the man whose letter Lark finds in the hobo jungle.

Angela Roosevelt

This is the elegant lady passenger Lark meets on her way to her Aunt Betty's house.

Grandma and Grandpa Browning

These are Lark's maternal grandparents. Grandpa seems a simple, straightforward man with a good work ethic. Grandma holds strong notions regarding marriage, child rearing, fashion and life in general. She cannot understand the changes occurring in the present-day world.

Captain at Hilly's Funeral

This gentleman represents the many mysterious people one finds in life. The other characters in the novel may or may not find out who he is.



Objects/Places

The Depot

This is the cramped one-room place where the Erhardts live. Papa lives and works here. Mama negotiates a rent-free arrangement with the railroad in order to save money to build a new home.

The Trains

Lark feels comfortable hearing the sound of the engines coming through the station. The trains are her first "friends" and they symbolize the journey of an American childhood, with all of their stops and starts.

Harvester, Minnesota

The small town where the Erhardts live.

St. Boniface Catholic Church

The Church is the place of Lark's First Confession and First Communion. Lark's relationship with the Church is one that parallels her journey from innocence and proves to be a rather bumpy, confusing ride. Lark tries very hard to understand religious theology.

#127—The Cape Ann

The house is the iconic symbol of the American Dream. Through hard work, the purchase of a new home is equal to making a better life for families. Lark learns that building a home of their own will be the answer to all their problems. The ultimate fairy tale, in actuality, is this American notion that owning a home will solve everything. It is Mama, in the end, who realizes that the house is not the answer to her problems.

Banjo Clock

Lark uses the pretty scenery of the clock and her imagination to escape the stress of her world. Here she thinks happy thoughts.



Brand Names

The Brand names throughout the novel are a symbol of capitalism. The Heinz ketchup, the Monarch canned peas, and other Brand names feed the American ideas behind money.

Morgan Lake

Aunt Betty and Uncle Stan's hometown, until they separate.

Blue Lake

The Browning grandparents' hometown. Mama and Lark visit Blue Lake on several occasions when there is something wrong in their lives. The color blue symbolizes sadness.

Cemetery

Lark's father spans her in the cemetery and she has the foreshadowing nightmare regarding the death of her innocence and the death of baby Marjorie. Hilly is also harmed beyond repair in the cemetery.

Sin List

Lark keeps track of her plethora of sins so she will be ready for her First Confession. The list is actually a healthy way for her to deal with her sins and other stress. She writes these down and it helps her to not carry them around, as a burden, on her shoulders.

Oldsmobile

Papa sells the car to pay off gambling debts. The Oldsmobile represents something of value that is lost because of Papa's bad habit. The Oldsmobile also represents a material item which Mama and Lark realize is not a necessity. After a year without the car, the family seems to be doing fine.

Liberty Magazine

Mama hits Papa with the rolled up Liberty Magazine during one of their many fights. "Liberty" is what Mama craves from the very first chapters. The magazine foreshadows the end of the book.

Hobo Jungle

This is a place of mystery for Lark. She meets imaginary friends here and finds clues to the world outside of her world.



Themes

American Dream

The pursuit of the American Dream can blind its pursuers to the actual problems they experience in life and indirectly cause some of the issues people experience. Arlene is an independent woman who is willing to work to make a better life for her family. Willie is the antagonist who attempts to regain some of the control he thinks he is losing. For all the steps Arlene takes forward, Willie pushes her back many more steps with his gambling losses, his anger and his attitude.

Lark is caught in the middle of all the tension between her parents and she learns how to use her imagination to escape. Lark learns to think that home ownership is the answer to all the world's problems. While it is a noble venture to desire something more for a family that gets only one chance on earth, people should try to see the reality of their problems and address these accordingly.

The time element is important here. It takes time to build a life for a family, it takes time to realize the root of a person's unhappiness, and it takes time to solve the problems. In the end of the novel, Lark sees the difference that time can make and she sees her Mama as more of an equal team member. She says, "It's a long way to California, Mrs. Erhardt. Maybe we'll think of something" (p. 342).

Depression

The Cape Ann is set in Depression-era America in the 1930s and 1940s. Living during a depression can mean that some people suffer the loss of jobs, the inability to secure employment, cutbacks in extra spending, the loss of homes and the loss of happiness. During a depression, people may feel as though they lose their right to pursue the American Dream because the "cards" are stacked against them.

Willie's cards are stacked against him (and his family) by reason of his own free will and choice. Willie seems to be the depression that affects his family. Arlene is ready to pour money into the Depression, just as she poured the gravy into the depression of Lark's mashed potatoes at dinner in the first chapter. Papa takes the tines of his fork and drags them through Lark's side dish, symbolizing the destruction of dreams.

Signs of Depression-era living in the book include: 1) the hobos in the "jungle"; 2) Uncle Stan moving somewhere else to find employment; 3) businesses like the tavern that has closed; 4) the Wellers denied credit for nonpayment of grocery bill; and 5) inability to buy food to eat, causing illness and eventual death. Once again, time is the most important element, the only element with the ability to heal everything.



Coming of Age

Six-year-old Lark loses most of her fairy-tale-like innocence and begins seeing the reality of the world around her throughout the novel. Lark's coming-of-age is a process that commences in the first chapter. Lark observes her mother and father in their specific roles and is in the unfortunate circumstance where she witnesses their unhappiness, which comes out in physical and emotional abuse. Lark internalizes her parents' anguish; she bites her nails. Later, when she is away from her father, she no longer engages in the self-destructive behavior. She no longer feels the previous anxiety she did when the couple lived together. Also in Chapter 1, Lark is made a part of their "team" by taking on the chore of dumping the slop pails.

When Lark's former ideas, regarding the fairy tales she has been told, are brought into the reality of her world, she is better able to make decisions for herself based upon truth. As Beverly bursts the bubble of Santa Claus, it is at once devastating, yet liberating for Lark. As Father Delias forgives Lark her sins and as he sheds light on the truth behind the maternity stork, Lark becomes genuinely happy.

Lark realizes that negative events occur in life, through no fault of her own. Ultimately, she realizes one of the greatest truths (and clichés) of the world—time heals all wounds.

Style

Point of View

The Cape Ann is the first-person narrative of six-year-old Lark Ann Browning Erhardt, who is growing up in a small town called Harvester, Minnesota in the 1930s and 1940s. Through Lark's young voice, the reader hears, sees and feels the same experiences as the narrator, as she makes sense of a nonsensical world. The author does not divulge every thought on every situation, however.

For instance, when Lark observes Uncle Stanley and the German Woman, Mrs. Kraus, performing sexual activities in the house next door, Lark's young mind cannot possibly know what is truly happening. She thinks, instead, that the man is dead, when they finish. Another example of this is found when Aunt Betty hemorrhages after terminating the pregnancy. The author does not come out and state the obvious because the true facts would not be obvious to young Lark. Lark only knows that she loves her aunt, her mother, and her grandmother. She learns that discretion in private family matters is a priority. She learns the value of the little white lie.

The entire novel is seen through Lark's eyes, and her thoughts and conclusions stem from her innocence. Many times, Lark is led down the wrong path, causing her to make decisions based on the misinformation often given to young children in America.

Setting

The novel is set in small-town Harvester, Minnesota during the Depression of the 1930s and 1940s. The Erhardt home is a room in the train depot where Papa works. The choice to live here is one made of free will, as part of a plan to save money for the building of a new home. The choice has nothing to do with the economic climate of the time.

Papa holds a good job at the train station and the Erhardt "ladies" travel on train passes to Morgan Lake, Blue Lake and eventually on to California. Near the train tracks, Lark finds the hobo jungle, which represents a layover spot for those men seeking work during the 1930s and 1940s. Here, Lark discovers clues to the many mysteries she recognizes in life.

The description of the unpaved, dirt crossroads is significant in that this description parallels young Lark's journey to discover the plethora of things of which she is still ignorant.



Language and Meaning

The language and meaning is simple and uses much dialogue to move the story forward. The actions of the adults surrounding Lark have the most impact on her and her journey from Kindergarten through Third Grade. Interspersed throughout the dialogue are Lark's innermost thoughts about her world.

It could be argued that two subplots, one of the mother, one of the father, and one main plot—consisting of Lark's reactions to her parents' actions—exist. However, the family members' individual lives are inextricably linked, so, really, one main plot exists, however divergent the paths of the mother and father.

The climax of the novel occurs when Papa goes to the train station to stop his wife and daughter from going to California. It is interesting to note that the character who is changed at this climactic moment is Mama, and only indirectly does Lark change through her mother. The mother-daughter relationship is the conduit for the change in the main character here, as well as throughout the entire novel. Lark is not yet a grown-up; she is still quite dependent upon her mother. After all, Lark is only about ten years old at the end of the book.

Structure

The Cape Ann is laid out in sixty short chapters, with each offering a small lesson or insight into Lark's coming of age, or loss of innocence. The novel follows Lark's childhood from the time of Kindergarten to the time she is in Third Grade. Over the four-year period, Lark learns many lessons. During Kindergarten, she learns to negotiate for the things she desires and she learns patience when listening to others talk about things that do not have much interest for her. When Lark is in First Grade, two main events occur that are memorable to her. First, she learns to read, and second, she experiences her First Confession. In Second Grade, Lark masters addition and subtraction, which she says is not so exciting, except for the fact that it makes her more of an adult and she will surely use the skills later in life. In Third Grade, she learns how to write in cursive.

It is telling, that in Chapter 43, Lark remembers what she learns in each of the prior grade levels. What she does not consider milestones in her life are the many life lessons she learns throughout the four-year duration. From her search for the truth, to coming to a reasonable conclusion regarding religion, to the utilization of diplomacy and discretion, to understanding that the process of gaining knowledge is a continual one, to realizing that all she has is time in this life of hers, Lark's journey is one filled with many, many milestones.

Lark, as the daughter of Arlene and Willie, is caught in the middle of her parents' problems, and as such, she sees life mainly through their eyes for the first half of the book. Lark more readily identifies with her mother and can see her Mama's positive characteristics. Her father, on the other hand, is seen as the person causing much of

the youngster's trouble, until Lark finally sees the reality of the situation and can break free. Lark eventually learns to live life more on the basis of who she is than on the basis of who her parents are.



Quotes

"Her tone implied that moral turpitude was responsible for pies with tapioca or cornstarch." (p. 1)

"I scooped out a well in the center for the gravy, and she took care to pour it into the depression." (p. 1)

"Taking up his fork, he reached across and dragged the tines through my potatoes, laying waste to the dam." (pp. 1-2)

"It's just like our house that doesn't get built," she cried. "You sit there eating pie and smirking. Everything is a joke. All my plans," she choked, "are funny, aren't they?" (p. 6)

"Their running jokes carried over from meeting to meeting, embroidered and appliquéd with fresh fabric and threads at each gathering until a complex tapestry of humor joined them in a tight sisterhood of group memory." (p. 7)

"I was like someone preparing for citizenship in another country—terrified I would be found unworthy." (p. 26)

"I could feel her anger like the summer heat that rose in waves from the brick platform." (p. 35)

"The wealth of worms was beyond anything I could have imagined." (p. 72-73)

"I was deliciously oppressed as the foreshadowing limits of time and money clashed with my inexhaustible desire to ride, to be a part of the machine." (p. 84)

"She was an excellent shot, and smart as money in her habit." (p. 110)

"It seemed one of those unreasonable perversities of grown-ups that Grandpa Browning should despise fairies." (p. 121)

"I don't like people who hold grudges and neither does God." (p. 239)

"Surely the most important thing about God was forgiveness. Yesterday he had forgiven me my sins, and I had become a brand-new girl." (p. 243)

"He was not an old poker player for nothing. He would try hard to be forbearing and tolerant. Wasn't that the manly thing to do?" (p. 321)

"It was not a mansion, yet it was a house that proclaimed from every clapboard and gingerbreaded eave, 'I am what I am, and that is enough.' If we lived there, we would one day be able to say that." (p. 338)



Topics for Discussion

Trace the major events that bring Lark from a state of childlike thinking to one of a child growing up.

Trace the symbolism of the word "dusty" throughout the novel.

How do the fairy tales harm young Lark? How do they benefit her, if at all?

Compare and contrast female and male roles during the Depression in America.

Why does Mama keep Bubba's watch and the letter from Earl Samson in her bureau drawer? Why does Lark want to keep them?

Describe how the pursuit of the American Dream can indirectly turn into a nightmare.

Explain the notion that family members are indeed strangers.