Desert Solitaire Study Guide

Desert Solitaire by Edward Abbey

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Plot Summary

Edward Abbey spends a six-month season in the Arches National Monument near Moab, Utah, working as a temporary park ranger. He is the only ranger at the park, which he prefers. Solitude agrees with Abbey, as does the oftentimes very silent desert.

An intense lover of nature, Abbey writes about the flora and fauna in a lyrical way. He knows all the names of the plants and animals, and much of the behavior of the native beasts. The behavior of visiting tourists does not appeal to him though, and he expresses strong contempt about their ways. Another thing that angers him is the ongoing development of the national parks. He thinks this destroys the wilderness, which should be preserved as everyone needs wilderness, whether they visit or not.

The main attractions at the park are the arches, no two alike. Abbey describes how nature creates them and the special features they have, including a delicate structure that, at a certain angle of view, resembles a wedding band. The park has three campgrounds that he maintains, along with his duties to help tourists in trouble and police the general area, consisting of 33,000 acres.

For diversion, Abbey helps a local rancher during the spring cattle roundup. He enjoys the work and does it for no pay. This leads to an attempt to capture one of the rancher's horses, a gelding that has gone wild, Old Moon-Eye. Try as Abbey might, Old Moon-Eye keeps his distance. The name of the horse refers to it having one bad, milky white eye.

Two desert adventures that Abbey chronicles involve a five-week stay near Havasu, a Native American settlement in a canyon off the Grand Canyon, and a rafting trip through Glen Canyon before the Glen Canyon Dam was completed, thus flooding the area to create Lake Powell. These two experiences do not seem to follow in time with the rest of the story, but they bring out important points. Abbey goes native while near Havasu and nearly dies in a canyon. The Glen Canyon trip brings out descriptions of the natural wonders that Lake Powell now covers.

Abbey helps to locate a sixty-year-old man in the desert who dies from exposure. Abbey also climbs the predominant peek of the area, Mount Tukuhnikivats. For his final adventure of the season, Abbey explores a small part of a remote network of canyons called The Maze. This involves an amount of technical mountaineering skills. Abbey does his first rappel.

The season ends, and Abbey must return to his home on the East Coast. He looks forward to rejoining civilization but has changed significantly over the past six months. His desire to come to know the desert in a deeply intimate way is not fulfilled, but he knows he loves the desert environment more than any other natural setting. He wants to return and wonders if he and the experience will be the same.

Chapter 1 The First Morning

Chapter 1 The First Morning Summary and Analysis

Edward Abbey drives 450 miles from Albuquerque, New Mexico to Moab, Utah. He has taken a job with the National Park Service and reports for duty at the headquarters building just north of Moab. He meets the park superintendent and chief ranger. They offer him coffee and give him directions to his work place, a small trailer house out in the wilderness of the Arches National Monument.

Darkness has already descended as he drives his pickup truck toward the trailer house. A small wooden sign guides him off the highway and onto a rough dirt track. A storm from the northwest builds with howling wind as he traverses the rocky, winding road upward to the trailer house about eight miles away. Abbey comes upon a dry wash crossing with a sign that warns not to cross if wet as the wash becomes quicksand after a rainfall. He chases up wildlife along the way, and snow begins to swirl around his truck and into his headlight beams.

He comes upon the ranger station, simply a wide place in the road with a National Forest information display. The trailer house, his home for the next six months, sets fifty yards away. He opens it in the truck light beams and brings in enough of his gear for the night. The trailer house is small and cramped. Abbey turns in for the night to the sound of the howling wind outside and scampering mice inside.

The next morning he examines the trailer house in more detail. It has running water from a raised tank on the hillside, a flushing toilet with a dead rat in its bowl, and propane gas for heating, refrigerating and cooking—more comforts than his mother had available while raising five children. He lights the heater, which does not circulate well, leaving his head in heavy heat and his lower body in cold air. After he thaws out his boots so he can put them on, he goes outside. The sun has not yet risen.

A magnificent landscape appears as the sun, hidden from full view by nearby cliffs, rises. The Arches National Monument sets in a vast ocean of desert bordered by snow-capped mountains. He sees mesas and canyons, the gorge of the Colorado River, balancing rocks and some of the arches. The difference between an arch and a natural bridge is that water flows under a natural bridge, at least at some times. The arches are holes drilled into the sandstone from the natural action of water freezing and chipping away the stone. The sandstone color varies from off-white to tan, brown and red. Abbey feels that he wants to own all this grandeur, and there is nobody around to dispute his strong desire.

A particular balancing rock inspires philosophical thoughts in the author. Abbey has taken this job with a clear objective. He wants to know everything in nature as it is, not as humans describe it. He wants to avoid anthropomorphism and science. He seeks "a hard and brutal mysticism in which the naked self merges with a non-human world and

yet somehow survives still intact, individual, separate. Paradox and bedrock" (p. 6). The sun clears the nearby cliffs and shines directly on the snow, making it brilliant to the point of pain. Abbey then fixes breakfast.

The author describes his deep and intense love for untouched nature in a lyrical style. An amount of contempt for civilization works its way in, but Abbey can understand why people might want to live in a city, a small community, a cabin by a lake, or wherever they desire. Everyone does not have his same idea of the perfect home, which for the author is the little trailer house in the middle of the desert vastness with no other human or evidence of human settlement within sight. Yet his camp is quite comfortable, as compared with primitive tent camping, and includes a shower. All parts of civilization are not contemptible.

Abbey's use of the phrase, "bedrock and paradox" repeats at the end of the book as the title of the ending chapter, possibly a reference to his failure to find the hard and brutal mysticism that he seeks in the desert, but also the fact that the desert has not changed, although the author may have.

Chapter 2 Solitaire

Chapter 2 Solitaire Summary and Analysis

Merle McRae, the park service superintendent, and Floyd Bence, the chief ranger, bring water in a tank truck for Abbey. Both are married with children, McRae about fifty years old and Bence about thirty. Abbey learns about their backgrounds and their desires to stay in the West close to the outdoors and as far away from paperwork as possible. Neither wants to be promoted to administration positions back East.

The three take a tour of the area in a fully equipped park service pickup truck provided for Abbey's use during his job. He is to help visitors, keep the three campgrounds stocked with firewood, and remove any trash left behind. The roads are unpaved but passable by any two-wheel drive vehicle, except during or just after a rainfall. They stop at the end of some roads and walk out on the trails. The overall beauty that makes the arches just one feature among many impresses Abbey. The sense of the land seems at first chaotic, but the idea of water drainage brings logic to it all. Only one spring-fed stream of undrinkable water, Salt Creek, flows through the park. The rest of the drainage involves rainfall and snowmelt.

Bence lends a park ranger shirt to Abbey and a badge to make him official looking. Abbey immediately arrests Bence and McRae as an invitation to dinner, but they need to leave due to other commitments. Abbey watches as they drive the tank truck through the desert.

Alone, the author feels the stillness and silence that makes even the ticking of his wristwatch stand out. The device seems to be a ridiculous piece of machinery in this place where the only sense of time is now, the present. He eats his supper and sits at a picnic table near the trailer house to enjoy the twilight and how it changes the color and character of the rocks. He builds a small fire from dead pinion pine branches and appreciates the aroma while composing a short poem-prayer:

"Go thou my incense upward from this hearth

And ask the gods to pardon this clear flame" (p. 12).

He takes a walk down the road after letting the fire die out. Abbey carries a flashlight but does not use it in order to take in the full environment. His musings on machinery carry through to when he starts the generator, powered by a noisy gasoline engine, in order to write by electric light inside the trailer house. The noise and bright artificial light shut him off from nature, a condition that does not bother him once absorbed in his writing, but one that he gladly turns off after finishing the writing task.

Abbey is a social person, as evidenced by his curiosity about McRae's and Bence's lives, also his supper invitation. He is not a loner in the usual sense of the word, alone among people. Nor is he a hermit in the negative sense of the word, a man shunning

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the worlds of other men from some kind of neurosis. He is alone only in that other people are not immediately around, and he does feel that loneliness as he realizes that no other visitors than McRae and Bence have come by his trailer house. The feeling passes quickly and other things take his interest—the sky, clouds, stars, rock formations, and even the silence in this part of nature. Additionally, he has a strong sense of spirituality in this place and performs an improvised ceremony nearly as ancient as humanity. Abbey lights a fire and composes a prayer, an act of a person connected with more than mere human society.

Chapter 3 The Serpents of Paradise

Chapter 3 The Serpents of Paradise Summary and Analysis

The desert becomes very windy in April. Dust devils spiral and fall apart shortly before the howling wind kicks up dust storms full of debris and sand at velocities strong enough to pit windshields. Abbey stays indoors and continues writing his letter to himself, meaning his journal.

He enjoys the morning hours when the birds make their songs. He can identify pinion jays, canyon wrens, ravens and mourning doves. While thinking about the birds, he falls into anthropomorphisms and writes about how this is inappropriate.

In the early morning Abbey sits on his doorstep, his feet unshod. He notices a Faded Midget rattlesnake coiled in the cold shade. His first thought is to kill the rattler, but he abandons the urge after remembering his duties as a park ranger—to protect all wildlife without discrimination. He quickly moves off the doorstep into the trailer and goes out the back door. From the government pickup truck, he takes a long-handled spade, and scooping up the rattler, he flips it away from the trailer. A week later, the same species of snake waits for mice underneath the trailer. Abbey decides to capture a gopher snake because that species repels rattlers. He finds one and befriends it.

The gopher snake keeps the mouse population down, which in turn removes what attracts the rattlers. The gopher snake likes to curl around Abbey's torso for the body warmth and occasionally pokes its head out his shirt, to the delight of park visitors. However, one day, Abbey returns to the trailer and the gopher snake is gone.

About a month later, two gopher snakes appear. Abbey is not sure if either one is his, but they do a complex mating ritual dance that fascinates him. He crawls on his belly very close. The snakes intertwine, pull apart, crawl in parallel and raise their heads as high as they can and then drop down, all in coordinated movements. Then they suddenly spot Abbey and move toward him. Abbey spooks, jumps up and away, and the two snakes slither away from him. He never sees them again, but feels that they are looking over him and controlling both the rattlesnakes and mouse population.

Abbey contemplates how animals should not be described as having human characteristics, although this is easy for him to do. He does attribute emotion to animals, some that may be like human emotion, but perhaps they feel in ways that humans cannot understand. Still, humans and animals do have common traits. The author concludes:

"We are obliged, therefore, to spread the news, painful and bitter though it may be for some to hear, that all living things on earth are kindred" (p. 21).

Chapter 4 Cliffrose and Bayonets

Chapter 4 Cliffrose and Bayonets Summary and Analysis

Abbey takes inventory of his garden, the plant life blooming among the rocks in the national monument under his care. Among these are cliffrose and Spanish bayonets, two strikingly different species. Mule deer browse peacefully on the cliffrose blossoms, while the Spanish bayonets repel all but the one species of moth that comes to pollinate and deposit eggs in a symbiotic relationship. The date is May 1, and life bursts from the garden profusely for a desert region. All is not well with nature, though. Natural predators, like coyotes, mountain lions and wolves, have been hunted down too much, resulting in overpopulations of deer and porcupines. The deer over browse areas and the porcupines kill pinion pine trees by eating the bark.

The author has a favorite juniper tree that grows close to the trailer. Part of the tree is dead and resembles a claw reaching skyward. Birds like to perch on this part when Abbey is not too close, and he estimates the age of the tree to be about 300 years. He attempts to understand the heart of this interesting being, but fails. He must settle for the vivid impressions the tree affords.

Abbey finishes his inventory of the pinion pine-juniper forest community in the high desert. He returns to the trailer and fixes breakfast as the wind blows sand that sounds like rain when it strikes the trailer skin. He does not mind whatever the weather brings as long as he is comfortable. After breakfast, he begins his rounds.

No visitors show up at the entrance, so he takes the government truck to check on the campgrounds. He drives to the Windows arch first and notes a large balancing rock, reflecting on how it will someday fall over. The road ends at the Double Arch campground, where he picks up a little trash before walking out on the trail. His thoughts revolve around the need for more predators and how the government helps the ranchers and sheepherders to eliminate them. Upon rounding a bend, he comes upon a doe and her fawn. He freezes, the deer stare at him, and upon Abbey making a slight movement, the deer bound away. He hollers that he wants to talk to them, and then thinks about how that would be foolish even if possible. What right has he to interrupt their natural way of being?

Abbey finds signs of coyotes at the North Window arch, and following the trail to Salt Creek Canyon, he finds coyote scat containing rabbit hair. On the way back up the trail, he sees a rabbit, and thinking about what he would have to do if in a survival situation, he kills the rabbit with a thrown rock. That this succeeded first surprises him, but then a strong feeling of becoming an integral part of nature takes hold. He tried an experiment and succeeded, and so the experiment will never need to be retried. The coyote must kill to survive, and Abbey can do the same if necessary. He leaves the rabbit for scavengers. They need the food more than he does.

His next destination is Delicate Arch. An old abandoned cabin is nearby, a depressing little place with a history. He stops briefly and continues to the Delicate Arch, one of the most interesting features of the park. The feet of many visitors have worn a trail in the sandstone. The arch looks different from various angles, but its primary shape is a big circle like a wedding band, and as the name implies, relatively thin. This seemingly impossible rock formation reminds Abbey that the wilderness is very different from the environments that humans create and far superior. He checks out the other arches in the park and returns to the cabin. Summer is coming to the high desert.

Abbey mixes science with his lyrical descriptive style, something he thought he could avoid when first coming to the Arches National Monument. He also thought upon his arrival that he could come to know nature simply by observing, but more needs to happen. He discovers this after killing the rabbit, an action that goes directly against his responsibility to protect all living things in the park, a part of his job. Nevertheless, nature is a balance. Predators must kill their prey, and the prey must eat their browse, in a balance that is as ancient as life itself. Taking the rabbit's life might be a violation of his job contract, but it is the right thing to do for a predator in nature. A job contract is a human invention, as is the extermination of predators a human mistake—a violation of nature's balance. Abbey feels that the balance is a more important thing than anything humans have invented. His act of killing as a predator brings him directly in touch with the balance, an initiation ritual that he stumbles upon, possibly through spiritual help. He mentions that a higher power seemed to have guided the rock to its target, and he is admittedly searching for something while alone in the wilderness.

Chapter 5 Polemic: Industrial Tourism and the National Parks

Chapter 5 Polemic: Industrial Tourism and the National Parks Summary and Analysis

A polemic is an argument about some controversial matter. The controversy that Abbey addresses concerns the future of the national parks and monuments in the United States, and he takes the stance of preservation over development.

The author likes his job. It pays well and involves an undemanding workload. He works hardest on the weekends when the tourist traffic is highest, but thanks to the dirt road access and the relative anonymity of the Arches National Monument, he has no troubles handling the routine. Abbey has Tuesday and Wednesday off, during which time he rests, and on Wednesday evening he goes into Moab for supplies and socializing with the locals, many of whom are ranchers, miners and shepherds. He finds the people to be pleasant, and although arguments sometimes break out, nobody becomes violent. Abbey attributes this to their work in the outdoors, the good pay, their self-confidence and the fact that Moab is a Mormon town that restricts alcohol to weak three-point-two beer.

Abbey relates an incident of a team of surveyors driving up to his trailer along a path restricted from motorized travel. At first thinking that he would issue a ticket for the infringement, the author searches for his ticket book, badge, shirt and hat. He then realizes that these people are government employees and offers them ice water. During the conversation, Abbey learns that the surveyors are staking out a route for a new paved road into the park. He suggests that the money will never be appropriated for the project, but the surveyors do not agree.

The narrative breaks away, and Abbey gives a rundown on what has happened since this incident. He lists the national parks that have been developed in order that more tourists visit than ever before, a situation he calls Industrial Tourism. The idea behind Industrial Tourism is to make profit from the park visitors. Abbey supports the restriction of this kind of development through government, specifically the Wilderness Preservation Act. He builds a lengthy case for banning all private motorized vehicles in national parks and monuments. Only shuttle buses, non-motorized travel (bicycles, horses, and people on foot) should be allowed. Abbey doubts that anything will turn back the development, and thus the diminishing of wilderness areas. Too much money backs Industrial Tourism and the population is growing too big. In addition to banning private motorized vehicles, he argues against building any new roads in national parks. He also thinks that park rangers should be wilderness guides primarily, not ticket-takers.

The narrative returns to the surveyors, who leave shortly after slacking their thirst with Abbey's ice water. The author takes a hike down the trail that the surveyors had

marked. He pulls up some of the stakes they have set and removes ribbon markers from the trees, fully aware of the futility but feeling good about his small act of defiance anyway.

Abbey compares the holiness of wilderness areas to that of churches:

"We have agreed not to drive our automobiles into cathedrals, concert halls, art museums, legislative assemblies, private bedrooms and other sanctums of our culture; we should treat our national parks with the same deference, for they, too, are holy places. An increasingly pagan and hedonistic people (thank God!), we are learning finally that the forests and mountains and desert canyons are holier than our churches. Therefore let us behave accordingly" (p. 52).

Two distinct viewpoints clash over our wilderness areas. One side wants to develop and exploit for profit, also to open the areas for everyone, including the very young and very old. The other side wants to preserve what some consider holy ground, but certainly all on this side want to preserve for the benefit of future generations. These clashing viewpoints continue their polemics to this day.

Chapter 6 Rocks

Chapter 6 Rocks Summary and Analysis

The West is full of rocks, as is to be expected from an area known for the Rocky Mountains. Abbey lists the names of many of the minerals to be found in Arches National Monument, including the remains left by Native Americans as they made arrowheads from obsidian, also known as Apache tears. The minerals of value were once gold, silver and lead, but for Abbey's time, uranium draws prospectors, miners and mining companies. This is due to the high prices that the Atomic Energy Commission offers for good ore and a $10,000 (about $58,000 in 2006 dollars) finder's bonus.

Two prospectors strike it rich, Charles Steen and Vernon Pick. However, most of the money is made in trading claims like commodities, through speculation and deception. Abbey observes that greed and easy money draw certain types of people to this kind of market, and he brings out the point that only corporations have the resources to do serious mining. Individuals usually go broke chasing down uranium or any other valuable mineral. The search for uranium presents a unique danger for these individuals: radiation poisoning.

Nature presents a more constant danger for prospectors. Two greenhorns try to traverse the Colorado River in an overloaded motorboat and capsize. They make it to shore, where they argue over which direction to walk out. Finally one heads away from the river toward a town and the other goes back upriver. A search team finds the first man quickly, but the second suffers exposure and starvation as he picks his way along the river. By sheer luck, he survives.

Abbey gives a colorful, intense accounting of the Husk family's fate while trying to strike it rich, much of which is conjecture extrapolated from fact. Yet the tale is believable, a bit of historic fiction within nonfiction. The facts are that Albert Husk partners with Charles Graham after Albert and his pretty wife and three children move from an East Texas farm to Moab. Charles owns the claims and Albert has the time to prospect them, so he buys in for $2,250, a forty percent share.

Albert works the claims with his eleven-year-old son, Billy-Joe. Charles starts an affair with Albert's wife and decides to kill him out on the lonesome claims located atop a mesa. One thing leads to another, and they both end up dead at the bottom of the mesa. Billy-Joe, with a dislocated shoulder, tries to walk back to civilization. Somehow, he ends up on a floating log in a river and is discovered near death. He dies a few days later in a Flagstaff, Arizona hospital. Around a year later, a lawyer approaches Mrs. Husk to buy the forty percent claim she had inherited. She bargains the price from an initial offer of $4,500 to a cool $100,000.

The lesson to be learned here is left up to the reader. A possible interpretation is that human greed causes people, usually men, to do foolish things. Another is that the

wilderness is unforgiving to those not prepared for its surprises. A third might be to avoid bargaining with a clever widow.

Chapter 7 Cowboys and Indians

Chapter 7 Cowboys and Indians Summary and Analysis

In June, spring arrives to the mountains, but it is already summer at the lower altitude in which Abbey works. He helps a local rancher round up cattle for a day. The rancher's name is Roy Scobie, a man of about seventy years who runs a combination cattle and dude ranch. He and Roy, along with a hired hand named Viviano Jacquez, a Basque from the Pyrenees on the French-Spanish border, ride out to round up cattle from the side canyons between Willow Seep and the stockyards at Moab, a distance of about ten miles.

Roy is a melancholy man. He has no real spirituality and thinks about death all the time. Abbey wishes he could cheer the old man up with quips from great philosophers, but cannot think of a way to do this. Viviano has a rowdy enthusiasm about his work and always brags about his romantic adventures with all the women he meets at the dude ranch and around Moab, the direct opposite of Roy.

They soon find their first group of cattle. Sorting out brands at this point serves no purpose, as that will be done later at the stockyards. All the ranchers round up whatever cattle they can find, and in the end, it works out. Abbey notes how ugly the cattle are and feels that the slaughterhouse may be too good for them.

The side canyons are tough going. Choked with cactus and brush, the roundup becomes hard work under the hot summer sun. Many of the cattle prove obstinate and refuse to budge from the shade until the cowboys force them to move.

Abbey describes Viviano as a good cowboy, a man who can sing, play the guitar, and tell fortunes in the cards. He also has a deep prejudice against Mexicans, Native Americans and Black people, a result of experiencing prejudice himself. Viviano wishes that he could join White society, but the color of his skin keeps him out.

The three finally take a break after a hard morning, but Roy has not brought anything to eat. This is a characteristic of Roy, a stinginess that serves against him. He pays poorly and always late in the hopes his hired help will leave without pay, but he ends up with unreliable workers as a result. Few customers return to Roy's dude ranch, and the cattle ranching does not make up for the loss. He talks depressingly about a man he knows who died of a heart attack at the age of sixty-six, somewhat younger than Roy. He then takes a nap.

The author reflects on Roy and his condition while drifting off to sleep. He wakes up and continues the cattle drive and roundup with the others. They come upon a pool of water in Sleepy Hollow and fill their canteens. Abbey is very tired by now, but he has more work to do before the end of the day. Quicksand pools lie ahead, along with a long pool

that stretches from one canyon wall to the other—no way around it. One of the cows becomes stuck, but Abbey manages to get it out. At the long pool, the same cow becomes stuck. Roy and Viviano throw lassos around the cow's head and pull with their horses. Abbey pulls up on the cow's tail to help give more buoyancy, and the animal is finally freed. Roy comments that the cow is worth $70 and could not be left behind.

The cattle roundup and drive finally end, and Roy treats Abbey and Viviano to beer and peanuts in Moab. The next day Roy plans to truck the cattle to summer pastures on Mount Tukuhnikivats, but Abbey must return to his job at the Arches. Years later, Abbey learns that Roy has died from a heart attack and that Viviano has left for somewhere, nobody is sure where.

Chapter 8 Cowboys and Indians Part II

Chapter 8 Cowboys and Indians Part II Summary and Analysis

The summer heat drives Abbey out of the trailer. He builds a crude shelter, sets up a cot and drags the picnic table from the front to the back of the trailer. Here he takes his meals, cooked in the trailer, and sleeps in the cool desert night.

Loneliness sometimes bothers him. He misses the company of someone friendly, but the feelings pass eventually. This is another reason he avoids the trailer interior. The surroundings remind him of more social times, while outside he receives some comfort from the company of wildlife. Abbey hears a great horned owl and imagines how both the owl and its prey, the rabbit, feel about each other. Dusk turns to twilight and the stars begin appearing and forming constellations.

The Navajo Native Americans fascinate Abbey. He understands the problem of being in the United States but of a culture that conflicts with the mainstream. Values on the reservation involve sharing everything, but that does not work in industrialized America. The Navajo population grows too quickly and money is hard to make, other than through the tourist industry, and this requires turning ancient rituals, customs and arts into commodities to attract the tourists' dollars. Tribal pride needs to be sacrificed for survival.

Along with the fascination for modern Native Americans and their unique issues, the petroglyphs (carvings on rock) and pictographs (paintings on rock) spur the author's imagination on what life was like for Native Americans before the advent of Europeans. He sees natural and supernatural figures in the ancient rock art, some much more ancient than others. A figure of a mastodon hints that these people were on the continent at least 20,000 years ago, but their transition to the present happened over only a few generations.

Old ways of living are dying out for the Native American, the American rancher and the working cowboy. Abbey mourns the loss. Growth hormones and mechanization replace the traditional cattle ranching practices. Working cowboys turn to other ways to make a living, such as performing in rodeos. Meanwhile, people who may have never ridden a horse or worked a roundup dress in absurd cowboy and cowgirl costumes, a fashion trend that seems to mock the plights of others.

The dying out of the Old West unites Native Americans and working cowboys into a tragic commonality. Both groups lose pride and suffer a quiet disdain from the rest of society. Subjects for the tourist's camera and performers for the tourist's pleasure, they fade away. Abbey ends the sequence of chapters on cowboys and Indians with a poem, an observation on the owl, and the realization that his stay in the wilderness has reached its midpoint.

Chapter 9 Water

Chapter 9 Water Summary and Analysis

Abbey talks with a tourist from Cleveland, Ohio, who thinks that the desert would be a better place if it had more water. The author counters with an argument that the desert is fine the way it is, and trying to make it just like Cleveland would destroy the special qualities of the area.

Only two creeks flow from springs in the Arches area, and both are not potable. Salt Creek is too salty and Onion Creek is poisonous. The best thing to do is carry at least a gallon of water for each person while out for a day, something Abbey learned while hiking down into the Grand Canyon with only a quart.

The cottonwood tree signals where water might be, but this may take digging for it. If a person suffers from thirst, dehydration is setting in and any loss of moisture through sweating makes the condition worse and more deadly. Other sources for water in the desert are small seeps in canyon walls and springs on canyon floors that create short streams, then the water sinks underground again. Hollows worn in rocks may hold rainwater for days, the larger of them for weeks. Enough water exists in the desert if one knows where to look for it.

No special sand makes up quicksand. Water pressure from below loosens the normal sand to give it the entrapping quality of quicksand. Abbey claims that people never drown from being caught in quicksand, but they may starve to death from not being able to get out. The hazard worsens for cattle and deer, their body weight supported by sharp hooves that quickly break through. People can walk across quicksand if done quickly. Vehicles become bogged down, even four-wheel-drives. The author tells a story about when his friend Newcomb became trapped in quicksand, and Abbey had to pull him out.

Abbey describes a typical summer thunderstorm in the desert. The clouds gather quickly and move across the mountains like ships on an ocean, then dump a great deal of rain mixed with lightening and thunder. In a few minutes, the storm passes and the desert rapidly dries out, but a flash flood may come surging by later.

In some parts of the desert, humans have drilled water wells and put up wind pumps that fill large tubs. Abbey thinks these fit right into the natural scenery, appreciated by people and animals alike. His thoughts turn to a type of frog that croaks loudly after a summer storm in a short attempt to reproduce between the dry periods. Abbey wonders if this is partly from joy, and that joy is a necessary thing for a species to survive and evolve. He then writes about how the politicians always try to bring new water to the Southwest in order to support growth, but growth cannot go on forever. Only so much water is available, implying that someday growth must stop. His imagination fills in a

scene of humans returning to a primitive state. They marvel about ancient dams filled with silt, massive waterfalls spilling over the tops.

Chapter 10 The Heat of Noon: Rock and Tree and Cloud

Chapter 10 The Heat of Noon: Rock and Tree and Cloud Summary and Analysis

The July desert heat intensifies to 110 degrees Fahrenheit in the shade. Abbey hurries from place to place when he must be in the sun, but he and most other animals seek out the shade until the sunset. The heat in the trailer drives Abbey outside to the shade of his ramada, where the dryness of the air and a slight breeze make the high temperatures almost comfortable.

Abbey writes about the need for wilderness. He believes that everybody needs wilderness areas, if not to enjoy directly, then to know that they exist and are available should the desire manifest. If the United States government becomes too repressive and tyrannical, the wilderness areas would provide effective cover for revolutionary forces, as do the wilderness areas of other countries.

The author lists eight signals that a dictatorial regime might be developing: populations amassing in huge cities, mechanizing agriculture eliminating independent-minded citizens, restricting private ownership of firearms, encouraging population growth, continuing military conscription, engaging in foreign wars to divert attention from social conflicts, building communications and travel networks, and destroying wilderness areas.

"This may seem, at the moment, like a fantastic thesis. Yet history demonstrates that personal liberty is a rare and precious thing, that all societies tend toward the absolute until attack from without or collapse from within breaks up the social machine and makes freedom and innovation again possible" (p. 130).

Breaking away from his political concerns, Abbey returns to observing the scorched desert. Spring blooms have all withered away and the only active creatures are turkey vultures, hawks and occasionally a golden eagle. He seeks a vision of truth from nature, but none is given that he can see or hear.

Chapter 11 The Moon-Eyed Horse

Chapter 11 The Moon-Eyed Horse Summary and Analysis

Abbey helps Roy with more cattle roundup and driving work, which he does for unpaid fun. A man named Mackie accompanies Abbey to Salt Creek and they water their horses. The water will sicken a man but not a horse. Abbey sees a trail of an unshod horse and tells Mackie that a wild horse is nearby. Mackie corrects him. The horse is one of Roy's, a gelding that ran away after Viviano gave it a beating, this after the horse threw a dude ranch guest. Called Old Moon-Eye due to one bad eye, the horse has lived in the wild ever since, ten years. Abbey declares that he wants the horse and Mackie welcomes him to it, if he can catch the wild beast. Abbey wonders what the horse does all alone and being a herd animal. Mackie thinks the question is senseless—nobody knows and nobody cares.

Abbey tries it. A month later, on a fearsomely hot day, he takes a hackamore and a short lead rope back to Salt Creek and Old Moon-Eye. With the hackamore and rope tucked beneath his shirt as not to spook Old Moon-Eye, he walks up the canyon where he expects to find the horse. He sees it pushed into a large juniper tree and approaches slowly, halting along the way, talking to the animal. He makes it to the tree and creeps just a few feet away from Old Moon-Eye, when in a flurry of hooves and branches, the horse bolts straight for Abbey, who must dive out of the way.

The horse runs away about fifty feet and stops. They watch each other as Abbey lectures the horse on what will happen if it does not return to its stable. He says that vultures will start eating him alive, and when he finally dies, a coyote will tear away his flesh. Then the bugs will take over from there, leaving nothing but bones and hide. None of this impresses Old Moon-Eye. Abbey tries to approach the horse, but it keeps its distance.

Abbey gives up at sundown and heads back to his horse for the return trip to the Arches. He thinks he hears footsteps following him, but when he looks back, nothing is there.

The author's habit of talking to animals is not anthropomorphizing as much as his attempts to actually communicate. He feels a connection to all living things, including plant life, and even the rock that makes up the desert and mountains. His attitude reflects an ancient philosophy that considers the deity or deities to actually be in nature, both living and non-living things, termed pantheism in Western culture. This idea ties into his desire to know and understand what seem like secrets that the desert holds, also his sympathy for Native Americans caught in modern culture.

Chapter 12 Down the River

Chapter 12 Down the River Summary and Analysis

Abbey and his companion, Ralph Newcomb, take a raft trip through Glen Canyon on the Colorado River while the construction of the Glen Canyon Dam proceeds, which will create the Lake Powell reservoir. With food, tarps, canteens, pipes and tobacco, they start their journey of about 150 miles in two inflatable rafts not much larger than inner tubes. They lash the rafts together to gain better control.

The river runs lower than normal due to a dry winter, and at the outset of their journey, the current pulls them along nicely. Somebody waves to them from shore, causing Abbey to reflect on people and what they put up with in civilization. He does not like people very much and the civilizations that they build even less.

Their first challenge comes quickly in the form of rapids. They negotiate the whitewater well enough for amateurs, luck favoring the foolish, and come out into the calm soaking wet. Soon afterward, they encounter more rapids. This time they manage to ground themselves in the shallows and must drag their rafts over sandbars. The river settles down after this initiation into the wilderness, and they will not see another human being until completing their journey. This suits both river runners just fine.

A white sand beach attracts the men to their first campsite. They gather dead willow branches and make a small fire, over which their supper of corned beef, beans and eggs sizzle. Brevity marks their conversations, with Newcomb cutting off any form of deep philosophical talk that Abbey tries to initiate, but thinks about continually:

"'Ralph Newcomb,' I say, 'do you believe in God?'"

'Who?' he says.

'Who?'

'Who.'

'You said it,' I say" (p. 158).

Abbey arises before dawn and prepares breakfast, the smell of which awakens Newcomb. They ask themselves why not go on forever like this, floating down a river surrounded by the sounds and sights of the canyon wilderness. Both agree that they would need to adjust themselves to the tranquility of it all.

The sun presents a heat problem, so they navigate to the shady side of the river. Abbey plays his harmonica—folksongs, pieces of symphonic tunes, and gospel songs from his childhood. That night the sound of rapids ahead concerns Abbey, but in the morning,

this turns out to be mostly mild ripples. The river never presents anything harsher than this for the rest of the journey.

The beauty of the canyon lulls them into idyllic moods, and neither can believe that the dam will soon, over the course of a few years, bury everything in water and mud in the name of human progress. Abbey fantasizes that someone might plant explosives in the finished dam and blow it up during the dedication ceremony. "Idle, foolish, futile daydreams" (p. 165).

Reflecting on the meaning of the term wilderness, Abbey defines it as a paradise that contains not only beauty but also danger, harshness and death. Civilization, in contrary motion, seeks to destroy the wilderness by taming it, as will happen when Lake Powell fills, the canyon is lost, and the area becomes a recreational spot for water skiers. He quotes Major J. Wesley Powell, the first White man to explore the canyon and the namesake of the future reservoir that will ruin what Powell found. Abbey then expresses one of his main themes. Wilderness is necessary for humanity, and any civilization that destroys wilderness lays the foundation of its own destruction.

They stop for lunch near an abandoned mining camp. Abbey notes the debris left behind and wonders about the stories behind the artifacts. He climbs the hill behind the mining camp and finds an old jeep trail that might lead to the mine but does not follow it. He instead studies the land. The Colorado River is so far down that none of the water ever reaches the desert upon which he stands, unlike the Nile that nourished ancient civilizations.

A side canyon provides the next campsite. Tired and hot, they eat a light supper before turning in for the night. The next morning they paddle up the side canyon, and Abbey takes a hike up the Escalante River, a stream not living up to the grand name, while Newcomb fishes for channel catfish.

Abbey finds many natural wonders within the side canyon. "There are enough cathedrals and temples and altars here for a Hindu pantheon of divinities" (p. 176). The ancient Anasazi have chiseled petroglyphs into the rocks at one point, and here he spies the ruins of cliff dwellings high up the canyon wall. Abbey imagines the pre-Columbians and the fear that drove them to this place and what made them abandon it. He tries to climb to the rim of the canyon, but his way is blocked, so he returns to the campsite and enjoys a late dinner of the catfish that Newcomb has caught.

Hole in the Rock marks the next campsite. The Mormons had, in 1880, traversed the Glen Canyon by digging it down enough to roll and lower their wagons through, a remarkable feat. Abbey climbs the historic trail to the top of the canyon. He thinks about God and argues against something Balzac had written.

The intrepid travelers lose track of how many days out they have been and pass the mouth of the San Juan River. At one point, Abbey's carelessness starts a fast-moving brush fire. A storm threatens but does not amount to much. Abbey visits Rainbow Bridge and envisions it once the canyon fills with water and creates Lake Powell. The natural

bridge will still be visible, but will not be as spectacular or special. The next day their journey ends.

Chapter 13 Havasu

Chapter 13 Havasu Summary and Analysis

While traveling to Los Angeles with friends, Abbey learns about Havasu, a Native American settlement located in a branch of the Grand Canyon. He decides to abandon the trip in favor of visiting Havasu at the bottom of the canyon, accessible only by a difficult dirt road. There he rents a horse and buys provisions for about a week, his intention being to stay at an abandoned mining camp outside of town.

About a hundred Native Americans of the Supai tribe live in Havasu. He finds the people to be comfortable with their primitive, by modern standards, lifestyles. Abbey thinks about sociologists and how they study primitive cultures, the intrusions and unintended insults, the impacts of the observers on the subjects, and does not like the whole idea. The Supai do not invite him to stay. He takes this as an invitation to move on, and he does.

At the mining camp, he sends the rented horse back home and tries to spend the night in one of the dilapidated cabins. The heat is uncomfortable, bugs bother him and bats fly through the glassless windows. On top of this, the cabin seems to be haunted. Abbey abandons the abandoned cabin in favor of a more pleasant spot near the top of a waterfall, where the falling water stirs the air enough to keep the mosquitoes and flies away. This becomes his home for the next five weeks.

The Supai invite Abbey to their Sacred Peach Festival in August. The festival lasts four days. He meets Chief Sinyala and a man named Spoonhead, with whom he has a hoarse race. People dance the Friendship Dance day and night, drink a good deal of peach wine, and some of the young men engage in a fight with a rival tribe, a traditional activity. Abbey parties hard and has to rest for two days afterwards.

Little by little, Abbey's consciousness changes toward the point of lunacy, but he is aware of this change. He walks naked among the cottonwoods, explores the abandoned silver mines, follows caves to the foot of the waterfall, and develops a kind of relationship with a red racer snake near the spring where he fills his canteen. He begins to lose the sense of himself and thinks about the French composer William Debussy and the English poets John Keats, William Blake and Andrew Marvell. A walk in Havasu brings him back from his metaphysical experiences and the sense of losing himself, possibly his mind.

While on a hike, he tries to take a shortcut back to his camp through an unexplored canyon. He descends through a slick chute to a point of no return. The chute is too slippery to climb back out, and what faces him is an 80-foot drop-off to rocks down below. Abbey, alone and trapped, cries. He gathers himself together and attempts to climb through the chute. He fails and again cries over his desperate situation. Then he

uses his walking stick to boost himself higher into the chute, where he manages to gain finger holds in the soft sandstone. He somehow scrambles through to safety.

Rain starts falling and Abbey takes shelter under an overhang that turns out to be an empty coyote den. The rain does not let up, so he builds a small fire and spends the night there. He is miserable but alive and free from the deadly canyon trap. He considers that night to be one of his happiest.

Abbey spends most of his time in the wilderness alone, thus breaking one of the cardinal rules of safety—always go with a friend or group. Yet he must have solitude to experience what he does. Companions would keep him grounded and safe but unchanged. He comes to understand the romantic and metaphysical ideas of old masters as not being so much lunacy, wishful thinking or impossible idealism as a different way of experiencing the world. A parallel to this is his brush with death. Something in him wants to survive so much that he finds an unlikely solution that, as if by magic, works. A companion would have likely talked him into taking the long way back to camp, the safe and insignificant way.

Chapter 14 The Dead Man at Grandview Point

Chapter 14 The Dead Man at Grandview Point Summary and Analysis

The late summer desert feels heavy and hot during the day. Rain falls even more briefly than usual and less often. The tourists seem torpid and weary. Abbey welcomes a break in his routines when a call comes in over his shortwave radio to join in a manhunt. A sixty-year-old tourist has been missing for two days.

Nobody expects to find the man alive. The harsh desert environment ensures death to anyone who enters it unprepared and inexperienced. The search party consists of eight people, including Abbey's brother, the coroner, a nephew of the missing man, a county sheriff and deputy, and from park headquarters, Merle and Floyd. They search the likely places a man lost in the desert might look for shelter—under trees and overhangs. Abbey looks over the rim of a mesa in case the man fell to his death. Abbey's brother finds the missing man dead and bloated beneath a juniper tree. The author thinks the man's death in the wilderness is a lucky break versus a pathetic death in a hospital, although the dead man might not agree.

The coroner, with the help of others, puts the corpse into a body bag and onto a stretcher. They carry the stretcher out to the awaiting hearse, the nephew relived of the task and walking ahead. Out of his earshot, the search party jokes about the dead man, but not in a cruel manner. Abbey thinks about how death brings out certain human behaviors like black humor and the desire to procreate. After much effort, they finally reach the hearse and the search party breaks up.

Chapter 15 Tukuhnikivats, the Island in the Desert

Chapter 15 Tukuhnikivats, the Island in the Desert Summary and Analysis

In late August, the desert heat finally drives Abbey into the mountains and cooler air. He drives his old truck over the Arches entrance road at record speed to the highway because he is in a hurry to make camp at a special place on Mount Tukuhnikivats, Ute for "where the sun lingers." He picks up supplies and gas in Moab and drives in darkness to his special place among aspens and near a clear brook. After fixing diner over an open fire and drinking a bottle of wine, Abbey crawls into his down-filled mummy sleeping bag for the night.

The next morning, he fixes a big breakfast and packs lunch for the climb to the summit of Mount Tukuhnikivats, a 13,000-foot peak. Abbey needs no special equipment for the non-technical climb, simply will and determination. He takes short rests and observes tiny tundra flowers growing in moss. Pikas, small rabbit-like rodents, whistle as he passes. Snow still melts in a rocky crevice. He tries hiking on the snow, but without an ice axe to help, the going is harder than on the loose rocks. A brief storm brings rain and hail.

He makes the summit and eats his lunch while surveying the countryside. Abbey thinks of the poetic names the pioneers gave places, such as Labyrinth Canyon and Dandy Crossing. He strips naked and tries to capture cosmic intuitions but ends up thinking about a particular woman.

On the way down, Abbey takes a shortcut on the snow. Using a flat rock as an improvised sled and the heels of his boots as brakes, he slides partway down the slope, and luckily stops uninjured. His descent takes only a fraction of the time for the ascent. Back at camp, he builds a fire to thaw out his feet and thinks about September, the last month of his job at the Arches.

Chapter 16 Episodes and Visions

Chapter 16 Episodes and Visions Summary and Analysis

Labor Day arrives, signaling the last big holiday of the tourist season, the subsequent heavy traffic to the Arches, and the end of summer. Abbey expresses both disdain for the tourists, how they stay in their vehicles rather than experiencing nature firsthand, and respect for their hard work within a society hardly anyone understands. He plays with them by telling his absolute truth, which they take as good jokes. Humor must have elements of truth within it and is best delivered deadpan.

The author ponders the Mormon religion. He sees the illogical parts, such as the Constitution of the United States being divinely inspired, yet having an amendment process that can change the inspiration significantly through ratification by enough states. He refers to the 18th Amendment, prohibition, which was repealed by the 21st Amendment. He also sees that the religion was perfect for settling the harsh Western environments. People worked hard, helped each other and shared resources fairly. With religion or not, that is the way people survive in the desert. Abbey admires the modern Morman friendliness and mentions that an elderly church member has saved his soul for him, whether he likes it or not.

Abbey prefers the desert to other natural settings, such as the mountains and the seacoasts. He understands that different people have different preferences, but the desert has attractive simplicity and mystery, qualities he does not attribute to the other environments. Additionally, the desert is not conducive to human settlement and thereby resists overdevelopment and overcrowding, unlike the seacoasts. His preference can be sketched but not defined. The desert provides him with an inexpressible something that nothing else can.

A visitor to the Arches talks long into the night with Abbey about civilization and culture. Many thoughts flow, often in conflict but not in heated arguments, which Abbey enjoys very much. Their observations and thoughts turn to the differences between civilization, a broad idea, and culture, a more specific idea. Both are complex and overlapping characteristics of humanity. The chapter ends with a complaint about national park overdevelopment and the author's observations regarding the changing constellations in the night sky. Winter approaches.

Chapter 17 Terra Incognita: Into the Maze

Chapter 17 Terra Incognita: Into the Maze Summary and Analysis

Abbey and Bob Waterman from Aspen, Colorado set out to explore a remote part of the desert called The Maze, a labyrinth of canyons. They interview a mechanic who has been there. The directions he gives are accurate and the advice sound.

The desert blooms in places due to a recent rain as they make their way to The Maze. Waterman brings climbing equipment, as part of the journey involves rappelling down a sheer drop to The Maze. Their first challenge presents itself as a narrow switchback road, barely wide enough for Waterman's Land Rover. Abbey spots for him, and they make the descent without incident.

Waterman expresses concern about being drafted and not wanting to leave the wilderness. Abbey offers to bring him supplies, but due to other concerns and a girlfriend, he decides to return home after the adventure. They reach the lip of the long drop to The Maze and discuss four distinct rock formations. Waterman rappels down first followed by Abbey.

They explore a small portion of The Maze, scouting for a possible route back up the drop. They find a way back that seems to be workable with only one tricky part, and deciding to make the rim before dark, they make the climb easily by sunset. The next morning promises snow, so they cut the trip short and head back to Moab. Sleet falls most of the way. Straight snow begins by the time they drive into town. The storm turns out to be the biggest of the season. They had made the right decision to leave The Maze while they could.

Chapter 18 Bedrock and Paradox

Chapter 18 Bedrock and Paradox Summary and Analysis

Abbey finishes his six-month stay in the desert and his job with the national park system. He had planned a farewell ceremony, but bad weather cuts it short. He leaves the Arches quickly to catch a flight to Denver, where he will take another flight to New York City, his winter home. He looks forward to again being in the city environment with all its humanity.

He parks his truck at a friend's house and prepares it for the winter. All flights have been cancelled due to the weather, but a new park ranger offers to drive him to a train station 30 miles away. Abbey accepts, and during the drive, he has a strong urge not to leave the desert. He does leave, wondering if he will return.

A thought comforts him. The desert will be the same no matter what. He may change and has changed, but nothing humans can ever do will permanently change the desert. He has visited the site where the first atomic bomb was detonated, and the desert has since reclaimed the area.

Characters

Edward Abbey

Edward Abbey takes a six-month job with the US Park Service as the only seasonal ranger at Arches National Monument in Southeastern Utah near the town of Moab. He lives in a small trailer house, but during the hot season, he spends most of his time in the ramada that he builds behind the trailer house. His job involves helping the tourists who come through, making sure the three campgrounds are clean and supplied with firewood and toilet paper, and protecting the wildlife. He has the authority to issue tickets to people breaking the rules.

The desert fascinates Abbey. He learns the names of all the arches, the plant life and the animals. Spring brings a profusion of wildflowers and many storms, mostly wind. Very little rain falls, but when it does, it comes down hard. He enjoys hiking to the various arches and occasionally, on his days off, he helps a local rancher with the spring roundup. This involves riding horses, which Abbey enjoys. He tries to tame a wild horse but fails.

His adventures include witnessing a complex snake mating ritual, rafting through Glen Canyon on the Colorado River, spending time near Havasu and almost being trapped alone in a small canyon, searching for a missing man who turns up dead, climbing Mount Tukuhnikivats, and exploring a labyrinth of canyons called The Maze. Nature, especially the desert environment, draws him to these adventures, some of which involve taking undue risk. Abbey strongly supports the preservation of wilderness as he needs it and so does the rest of humanity. He believes that if a person never visits the wilderness, just the idea of its continuing existence gives enough benefit.

Abbey tries to be fair with his opinions and sees the other sides of arguments. He is well read and often quotes from literature and poetry. He understands music, plays the harmonica well, and includes musical stave representations of bird songs in the book. By no means does he advocate the sabotage of progress, such as the Glen Canyon Dam, but he does fantasize about blowing the thing up and saving the canyon. He possesses the naturalist's heart, the intellectual's mind, the novelist's imagination and the poet's soul. Not overtly spiritual, he thinks about religions quite a bit, both modern and ancient. In his own way, he prays in the desert and seeks enlightenment of some sort.

Tourists

Tourists present Abbey with a target for contempt. He must serve these people, but he is not required to admire them. They irritate him with the same foolish questions, to which he honestly answers. The tourists think he makes jokes, but he really means what he says, and what he says flatters no tourist.

One in particular, a Nazi-minded man with a Bavarian accent, irritates Abbey severely. The smallish man talks of racism as if this is the only rational way to think. Abbey thinks differently and wishes the little man gone, but he keeps hanging on.

Abbey's contempt takes a brief turn toward admiration for what everyone must endure in the modern world of overwork and ultra convenience. The motor homes, trailers and cars keep people locked up from experiencing what nature offers. They hurry from national park to national park, trying to get in everything within their allotted vacation time and seeing nothing as a result. Exhausted, they return home to their jobs in need of a vacation. Abbey does it the right way by living and working in the place he loves. However, at the end of the season he must return home to New York City. Abbey is a tourist as well—a long-term tourist, but a visitor to the desert nevertheless, not a native and not a committed resident.

Park Rangers

Abbey is a park ranger. He wears an official Smokey the Bear hat, shirt and badge while on duty and does his job conscientiously. He likes the other rangers he meets but not the people in Washington D.C. who plan to develop the national parks by paving roads, building parking lots, and all the other so-called improvements. Abbey wishes that park rangers were allowed to do their true jobs in introducing people to the wilderness and teaching them how to appreciate nature, along with how to survive within it.

To the author's eyes, park rangers are becoming nothing more than amusement park hucksters, ticket takers and tourist herders. This trend goes along with the efforts to make wilderness access more convenient while destroying the wilderness in the process.

Another duty of a park ranger involves lost tourists. Abbey and the other local rangers search for a man who has been lost in the desert for two days. The man is sixty years old and has no water or experience with the desert. He is certainly dead but must be found and brought out to the coroner's hearse. The search party finds the bloated body and hauls the smelly corpse out. Not all of a park ranger's duties are pleasant.

Ranchers

Abbey helps a local rancher, Roy Scobie, with the spring cattle drive, where Abbey rides a horse with Roy and a hired hand named Viviano as they look in canyons for the cattle. The work is hard and the day hot, but Abbey does it for fun, not pay. Roy is a melancholy man too concerned with his own death. Viviano is quite the opposite, a wild youth having fun. Abbey describes exactly what the cowboy life is like. It's hard, hot and dirty with little, and sometimes no, pay.

Native Americans

Abbey sympathizes with Native Americans, especially the Navajo who have an extensive reservation not very far away. Their old, traditional agricultural life gives way to modern economics, especially the tourist trade. Abbey sees this as unavoidable and not good for the Navajo, but he does recognize and honor their heritage.

Townspeople

In a similar manner, Abbey respects the townspeople of Moab. He drinks three-point-two beer with them, trades stories and plays pool. One Mormon woman has claimed his soul for heaven, but Abbey is not in such a hurry to go. Ultimately, the townspeople end up depressing him and he must return to the Arches.

Mormons

Abbey's respect for people extends to the Mormon communities and their pioneers who built the initial settlements in the hostile desert. While the theology and mythology makes little sense to him, Abbey understands that the ethics serve to keep communities strong and the community members working together for the common good. These qualities appeal to Abbey's sense of politics, which is more on the social consciousness side than the capitalistic opportunism side.

Major John Wesley Powell

The first person to lead a party into Glen Canyon and publish a book on the adventure, Major John Wesley Powell, is one of Abbey's pioneer heroes. While rafting the Glen Canyon, Abbey thinks often of Powell's book and tries to find places that it describes. He also admires the courage and strength of the early explorers.

Ralph Newcomb

Ralph Newcomb, a man with a heavy black beard and a bad leg, accompanies Abbey on two adventures, one involving quicksand and the other the raft trip through Glen Canyon. Ralph is a man of few words and not one for philosophical or political discussions. Abbey finds this a little frustrating but enjoys Ralph's quiet ways and the catfish he catches.

Bob Waterman

Bob Waterman accompanies Abbey to The Maze. Bob drives his Land Rover, confident that little can stop it. He also knows mountaineering techniques that allow the descent into The Maze. Facing a possible draft into the military, Bob expresses his concerns to

Abbey. For a time, Bob considers hiding in the canyons, but he decides to return home to his girlfriend and his fall semester at college.

Objects/Places

Arches National Monument

Abbey takes a job as park ranger at Arches National Monument in Utah. The main attractions of the park are natural arches formed in the sandstone bedrock by natural forces over thousands of years.

Moab, Utah

Moab, Utah is the nearest small town to the Arches. Abbey visits at least once a week to purchase his supplies and to socialize with the townspeople.

Glen Canyon

Abbey and Ralph Newcomb raft through Glen Canyon on the Colorado River before the Glen Canyon Dam is built. They visit amazing places that will soon be covered by the waters of Lake Powell.

Havasu

Havasu is a small Native American settlement located at the bottom of a side canyon off the Grand Canyon. Abbey becomes trapped nearby in a smaller canyon but manages to escape.

Mount Tukuhnikivats

Abbey climbs Mount Tukuhnikivats on a camping trip. The mountain stands out from the other surrounding peaks due to its bald top and prominence.

The Maze

The Maze is a complex and remote labyrinth of canyons that very few people have explored. Abbey visits this area with Bob Waterman, a trip that involves technical mountaineering rope techniques.

Trailerhouse

Abbey lives in the park trailer house during bad weather. The trailer house affords shelter, cooking, refrigeration and a shower, but is too hot in the summer sun.

Ramada

The ramada is an open shelter that Abbey builds behind the trailer house. He spends most of his time there during hot weather.

Cherry Wood Walking Stick

Abbey always hikes with his cherry wood walking stick. While trapped in the small canyon near Havasu, he uses the walking stick to escape.

Horses

Abbey loves horses. This is one of the reasons he prefers the desert to other wild and natural places where horses are not appropriate. He tries to capture Old Moon-Eye, a gelding that has gone wild.

Desert Flora

Abbey knows the desert flora in great detail. He often describes the plant life, how it survives in the desert and how he tries to reach a deeper understanding of it.

Desert Fauna

Abbey knows the desert animal life as well as the plant life. He regularly interprets the interactions of predator and prey and sometimes talks to the animals.

Sun

The desert sun blazes during summer days, forcing most creatures to seek shade or other protection, such as burrows. Abbey's method is to spend time in the shade of his ramada.

Night Sky

The stars and moon shine brilliantly in the clear desert air without light pollution interference. Abbey takes note of the changing constellations as the season progresses from summer to fall.

Weather

The desert receives very little rainfall, but when the storms come, rain falls fast and strong. Flash floods gouge the canyons out of the sandstone bedrock. The action of freezing water carves the arches.

Petroglyphs

Ancient Native Americans left rock carvings throughout the desert. Abbey remarks often about the petroglyphs, and images of the carvings begin each chapter of the book.

Themes

Natural Beauty

The author describes the natural beauty of the desert as can only be experienced through living there over an extended period and observing closely on foot or from the back of a horse. Most visitors to the desert miss the details and consider it a barren wasteland, worthless and without merit. Abbey's sharp and poetic descriptions bring the reader as close as possible without actually being there.

The beauty has two sides. One is calm and serene, blissful over time. The other is unforgiving and suddenly violent, as when a flash flood destroys all in its path without pity or remorse. The sun blazes, ready to take unaware life, such as the sixty-year-old man who becomes lost and dies beneath a tree. Ground water may be poisonous and a misplaced step can lead to a short fall into oblivion. However, the beauty intensifies from the danger it holds.

Running twenty-four by seven, each part of the day and night has its beauty if one is aware enough to detect it. Abbey catches a robust portion as he meditates on the landscape, traverses the canyons and rivers and tries to capture a wild horse. He sees beauty in other places and situations too, just not as intensely.

The author acknowledges that the desert is not for everyone, nor should it be. To him it is home. Others may prefer the mountains, the seacoast, a lakeshore cabin, small town or city. Abbey appreciates the solitude and quiet, while others may find this uncomfortable, even maddening. Beauty is in the soul, not just the eye.

Balance of Nature

Nature finds a balance over vast time spans. The desert has this balance and keeps it better than other places, mostly due to its lack of value to humankind. The desert is beautiful, but that in itself does not pay the mortgage or bring profit to the stockholders. A miner cannot purchase eggs with a piece of ordinary sandstone.

Abbey witnesses the way nature balances out. The weather brings water, without which no life can exist. The water comes briefly and often violently, nourishing plant life that has adapted to the harsh environment. Only so much can live under these conditions, and thus the plants grow spaced apart. Small animals eat the plants, larger animals hunt the smaller, and in the end, the ravens and vultures receive their nourishment from the dead. Abbey notes that there are no vacant slots in the desert—creatures displaced from their homes through flooding a canyon to create Lake Powell will need to fight harder for survival. Many will not make it.

Not so delicate, the balance of nature returns even after humankind tests an atomic bomb in the desert, a renewal that Abbey has seen for himself. First the tough desert

plants return, then the persistent animals. The author knows that even if humanity decides to destroy itself by nuclear war, nature will eventually balance out into as many environments as possible, and as lush as possible. However, people may never return. To nature, this is of no particular consequence. The desert does just fine whether Abbey returns to it or not. Abbey needs the desert more than the desert needs him.

Abbey creates a particularly striking image of humans who, having been thrown back by a nuclear war to primitive ways, come upon the huge dams built before the holocaust. They wonder at the immense waterfalls as the mighty rivers pour over, the reservoirs now full of silt. One can extrapolate, where the dams break, wear down and all trace of them eventually washes out into fine silt. At that point, nature will have restored the wonders, and thereby the balance, that had been perturbed by humankind.

Progress and Wilderness Destruction

Abbey rails against the taming of the national parks. Paving roads, building parking lots, installing flush toilets and Coke machines diminish the natural beauty of the parks and open them to people who did not appreciate them in the first place. He yanks up the stakes for a new paved road into the Arches, left by a surveying party. Abbey knows this action of futility will not stop progress and the eventual destruction of the natural beauty in favor of something false and pale.

The Glen Canyon Dam under construction portends a worse destruction of wilderness. The Arches will continue to exist, while the dam will flood the wonderful Glen Canyon. However, the dam will also provide water for growing communities and recreation for the people who live there, which points to a conflict that continues to this day. Should wilderness areas remain wild and inaccessible to all but the fit and able, or should wilderness areas be developed so the very young, the very old and the disabled can visit and enjoy at least a portion of the area? Abbey embraces the first idea, preserve wilderness areas as they are. To improve them is to diminish them.

Abbey fantasizes about someone setting explosives in the Glen Canyon Dam that go off at the dedication ceremony. He wisely considers this to be meaningless wishful thinking, as other attempts at resisting progress have failed. Throwing shoes into the machinery did not stop the Industrial Revolution, and blowing up dams will not stop the damming of rivers. The author does suggest several ways to compromise, where the paved roads in national parks can be kept but private motorized transportation eliminated. There could be shuttle buses and bicycles only, with foot traffic preferred. He has no solution for the damming of rivers, other than humanity should behave more reasonably.

Personal Growth

From the first morning to his departure in the fall, Abbey grows tremendously. His first impression of the desert is merely a sketch of the shapes and colors, but he realizes this situation and hopes to understand the mysteries to great depth. However, his favorite juniper tree reveals nothing other than a sense of its essence. Furthermore, he

falls into anthropomorphisms when the animals are equally as opaque. The only thing that he can come to understand better is himself.

Abbey does introspective meditations while observing nature and sorts out his thoughts on various subjects. He volunteers his time and effort to a miserly rancher. He listens to the townspeople. These are the same things that spiritual seekers do, and often in a desert wilderness. Yet the author does not usually cast his experiences into spiritual terminology. He instead ponders the beliefs of others and the worth of these beliefs. Some ideas seem improbable, such as carrying solid gold tablets around that, if this were fact, would weigh more than a person could possibly carry. He moves past these myths to the practical implications of the Mormon faith. The faith builds strong and fair communities, and Abbey thinks this is very worthwhile.

After escaping the canyon trap near Havasu, Abbey spends the best night of his life, although cold and miserable. He has survived by his own wits, and if he were spiritual, by the grace of God. Something helped him out of the canyon. A materialist might explain this away as the results of adrenaline on the body and mind, and this may very well be the case. However, the fact remains that Abbey survives and comes away from the experience with a deeper sense of life.

The book ends with the lines, "Will I be the same? Will anything ever be quite the same again? If I return" (p. 269). This implies that Abbey has changed dramatically, and his awareness of this change has not fully developed, if such changes ever fully develop. He completes a season in the wilderness, a compressed experience in which more happens than can be initially assessed. Much is stored in his subconscious that needs to bubble up through reflection, dreams and impressions during his ongoing life. The growth, although tremendous, has just begun.

Style

Perspective

Edward Abbey writes from a solid background in literature, art and music. His lyrical style derives from both the classic naturalist writers and great poets. As for his experience with nature, he grew up in a small Pennsylvania town where he likely first developed his love of nature and the outdoors lifestyle. Other than that, Abbey learns by doing and has incredible luck getting out of jams.

The author writes for anybody who will read his work. According to the Author's Introduction, much of the book comes directly from his journal, and thereby the prose carries flavors of conversation and informal storytelling. The reader can imagine sitting down in a Moab three-point-two bar with Abbey and listening to him spin the yarns, possibly with animated gestures and acting out situations. In places, he becomes a lecturing environmentalist, in others the sensitive observer of humanity, a sociologist without the tape recorder, camera and notepad. Abbey's style often follows his flow of consciousness and recollection, which creates another sense of being in the same room with him. A fair-minded man, the author tries to balance one position on a subject with another, although the idea that nature would do fine, if not better, without humankind comes through loud and clear.

Also loud and clear is the message that humans should treat wilderness areas better by leaving them alone. However, big money interests drive the development, so this will likely never happen. Abbey suggests ways to compromise between full development and full wilderness, seeking another balance.

Beside his political stances, Abbey writes about his experiences with the wilderness. His monologues entertain and inform, being as much field guide as adventure story. While in the desert, wear a hat, seek the shade and know how to find water, notice the flowers and trees, talk to the deer, watch as nature changes, look out for flash floods, and avoid jumping down chutes into unknown canyons. You may never get out.

Tone

Abbey's tone changes like the desert in different lights and seasons. He runs off into fanciful flights of imagination, tells the situation straight with no restriction, and describes scenes at length. At times his tone has an urgency to it, something needs to be done right now! Other times he lays back and enjoys the ride down the Colorado River. At all times he strives to be honest with himself, even to the point of admitting his desperate tears while trapped in the canyon near Havasu.

The author makes use of strong desert characteristics in his prose. Colors are pastel, vivid, shadowed and beautiful. The night sky draws close, full of bright stars forming constellations. The summer sun is painfully bright and oppressive. Animals seek shelter

and water, as does he. They each have their own personalities, as does he. The further along Abbey moves in his wilderness season, the closer he becomes part of the desert. His tone suggests this melding, but he also resists going completely native. A part of civilization always makes its way to the surface, whether remembered music, lines of poetry or the works of great writers.

While writing about his interactions with tourists and other people, Abbey's humor shines through. He plays with Newcomb while his friend is deep in quicksand and sinking. His conversations with tourists, especially the little Nazi, end up with wishing them well, as in fall into the well and never climb out. The overall tone comes through as good-natured and approachable for everyone, regardless of politics, religion or relationship with wilderness. A reader who lives in the mountains or sails the high seas will come to understand what makes Abbey tick, as will politicians and even the tourists in their steel mastodons.

Structure

The book follows along chronologically except for a few places. The chapter regarding his raft trip mentions at least a week on the river, more than his usual two days a week off. His account of Havasu and his entrapment in the canyon takes five weeks, another unlikely event during his season in the wilderness. Still, both chapters bring in the elements of danger and conflict, and however jarring this is to the chronology, they fit into an overarching theme: The wilderness changes people, mostly for the better and sometimes terminally, such as the death of the sixty-year-old man.

Story flow is loose and reflects how the mundane separates major events. Yet the stories do reach climax within themselves and major climax toward the end. Havasu brings the author to the brink of death, but he survives. Immediately after, he searches for the dead man at Grandview Point. Then there's a climb to the peak of Tukuhnikivats, a somewhat symbolic gesture, followed by a leisurely coast through Labor Day, his end-of-season Maze adventure, and finally his departure.

Subjects change often within chapters, which corresponds with Abbey's claim that most of the work comes from his journals. The transitions are sometimes abrupt, as if a few days separate journal entries. Many of the passages can be understood without having read anything preceding them while others require prior reading. Nothing follows any established format, yet the lack of solid structure works. Abbey is telling stories and giving opinions as if in a little Moab bar.

Quotes

"What are the Arches? From my place in front of the housetrailer I can see several of the hundred or more of them which have been discovered in the park. These are natural arches, holes in the rock, windows in stone, no two alike, as varied in form as in dimension. They range in size from holes just big enough to walk through to openings large enough to contain the dome of the Capitol building in Washington, D.C. Some resemble jug handles or flying buttresses, others natural bridges but with this technical distinction: a natural bridge spans a watercourse—a natural arch does not. The arches were formed through hundreds of thousands of years by the weathering of the huge sandstone walls, or fins, in which they are found. Not the works of a cosmic hand, nor sculptured by sand-bearing winds, as many people prefer to believe, the arches came into being and continue to come into being through the modest wedging action of rainwater, melting snow, frost, and ice, aided by gravity. In color they shade from off-white through buff, pink, brown and red, tones which also change with the time of day and the moods of the light, the weather, the sky" (p. 5).

"The fire. The odor of burning juniper is the sweetest fragrance on the face of the earth, in my honest judgment; I doubt if all the smoking censers of Dante's paradise could equal it. One breath of juniper smoke, like the perfume of sagebrush after rains, evokes in magical catalysis, like certain music, the space and light and clarity and piercing strangeness of the American West. Long may it burn" (p. 12).

"At times I am exasperated by the juniper's static pose; something in its stylized gesture of appeal, that dead claw against the sky, suggests catalepsy. Perhaps the tree is mad. The dull, painful creaking of the branches in the wind indicates, however, an internal effort at liberation" (p. 27).

"In the end the beer halls of Moab, like all others, become to me depressing places. After a few games of rotation pool with my friend Viviano Jacquez, a reformed sheepherder turned dude wrangler (a dubious reform), I am glad to leave the last of those smoky dens around midnight and to climb into my pickup and take the long drive north and east back to the silent rock, the unbounded space and the sweet clean air of my outpost in the Arches" (p. 41).

"Another prospector, an amateur but equally fortunate, was Vernon Pick. Drifting in from somewhere out of the Midwest, he lost himself for weeks at a time among the haunted monoliths and goblin gulches above the Dirty Devil River; poisoned himself drinking its foul waters but survived to locate deep in that intricate voodooland a smoldering radioactive hoard which he named, poetically, The Hidden Splendor" (p. 63).

"Roy's no Mormon and not much of a Christian, and does not honestly believe in an afterlife. Yet the manner of death he fears does not sound bad to me; to me it seems like a decent, clean way of taking off, surely better than the slow rot in a hospital oxygen tent with rubber tubes stuck up your nose, prick, asshole, with blood transfusions and

intravenous feeding, bedsores and bedpans and bad-tempered nurses' aides—the whole nasty routine to which most dying men, in our time, are condemned" (p. 83).

"A difficult transitional period. Tough on people. For instance, consider an unfortunate accident which took place only a week ago here in the Arches country. Parallel to the highway north of Moab is a railway, a spur line to the potash mines. At one point close to the road this railway cuts through a hill. The cut is about three hundred feet deep, blasted through solid rock with sides that are as perpendicular as the walls of a building. One afternoon two young Indians—Navajos? Apaches? beardless Utes?—in an old perverted Plymouth came hurtling down the highway, veered suddenly to the right, whizzed through a fence and plunged straight down like helldivers into the Big Cut. Investigating the wreckage we found only the broken bodies, the broken bottles, the stain and smell of Tokay, and a couple of cardboard suitcases exploded open and revealing their former owners' worldly goods—dirty socks, some underwear, a copy of True West magazine, a comb, three new cowboy shirts from J.C. Penney's, a carton of Marlboro cigarettes. But nowhere did we see any eagle feathers, any conchos of silver, any buffalo robes, any bows, arrows, medicine pouch or drums.
"Some Indians" (p. 109).

"More secure are those who live in and around the desert's few perennial waterholes, those magical hidden springs that are scattered so austerely through the barren vastness of the canyon country. Of these only a rare few are too hot or too briny or too poisonous to support life—the great majority of them swarm with living things. Here you will see the rushes and willows and cottonwoods, and four-winged dragonflies in green, blue, scarlet and gold, and schools of minnows in the water, moving from sunlight to shadow and back again. At night the mammals come—deer, bobcat, cougar, coyote, fox, jackrabbit, bighorn sheep, wild horse and feral burro—each in his turn and in unvarying order, under the declaration of a truce. They come to drink, not to kill or be killed" (p. 126).

"Through half-closed eyes, for the light would otherwise be overpowering, I consider the tree, the lonely cloud, the sandstone bedrock of this part of the world and pray—in my fashion—for a vision of truth. I listen for signals from the sun—but that distant music is too high and pure for the human ear. I gaze at the tree and receive no response. I scrape my bare feet against the sand and rock under the table and am comforted by their solidity and resistance. I look at the cloud" (pp. 135-136).

"But no, this is not all what we feel at this moment, not at all what I mean. In these hours and days of dual solitude on the river we hope to discover something quite different, to renew our affection for ourselves and the human kind in general by a temporary, legal separation from the mass. And in what other way is it possible for those not saints? And who wants to be a saint? Are saints human?" (p. 155).

"In all of this vast well of space enclosed by mesa and plateau, a great irregularity arena of right angles and sheer rock in which the entire population and all the works of—Manhattan, say—could easily be hidden, there is no sign whatever, anywhere, of human

or animal life. Nothing, not even a soaring buzzard. In the heat and stillness nothing moves, nothing stirs. The silence is complete" (p. 171).

"It didn't stop. The rain came down for hours in alternate waves of storm and drizzle and I very soon had burnt up all the fuel within reach. No matter. I stretched out in the coyote den, pillowed my head on my arm and suffered through the long long night, wet, cold, aching, hungry, wretched, dreaming claustrophobic nightmares. It was one of the happiest nights of my life" (p. 205).

"Each man's death diminishes me? Not necessarily. Given this man's age, the inevitability and suitability of his death, and the essential nature of life on earth, there is in each of us the unspeakable conviction that we are well rid of him. His departure makes room for the living" (p. 214).

"So much for the stars. Why, a man could lose his mind in those incomprehensible distances. Is there intelligent life on other worlds? Ask rather, is there intelligent life on earth? There are mysteries enough right here in America, in Utah, in the canyons" (p. 249).

"The old moon, like a worn and ancient coin, is still hanging in the west when I awake" (p. 257).

Topics for Discussion

What are Edward Abbey's views regarding the environment?

Why does Abbey call himself a desert rat?

List Abbey's suggestions for compromise when it comes to national park development.

Describe two ways one might find potable water in the desert.

Describe the processes that cause natural arches and canyons.

Of what importance is uranium to the desert Southwest?

List the different kinds of petroglyphs illustrated in the book.

Why is Abbey against putting a paved road into Arches National Monument?

What are the major natural characteristics of the desert in spring, summer and fall?

What are the things that Abbey looks forward to upon his return to the East Coast?

What is The Maze and why do so few people visit this area?

Research Edward Abbey's life and death. What is unique and appropriate about the way he was buried?