

Did You Ever Have a Family Study Guide

Did You Ever Have a Family by Bill Clegg

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Plot Summary

Bill Clegg's *Did You Ever Have a Family* opens with the perspective of Silas, a pot-smoking teen, who hears sirens blaring on the day after he did yard work for Luke, his boss, in Wells, Connecticut. Luke's older girlfriend, June, expects her yard to be used for her daughter's wedding, but the stove in the house explodes early in the morning. June, sleeping outside, is unharmed, but her daughter Lolly, her would-be son-in-law Will, her ex-husband Adam, and her boyfriend Luke all die in the explosion. June spends the rest of the novel in a haze of despair trying to retrace her daughter's steps in an attempt to connect with Lolly after her death.

Clegg switches his novel's perspectives primarily among June and Lydia, the mother of Luke, but includes almost his entire cast as narrators. Consequently, the story leaps from diverse situations featuring differing narratives in an attempt to piece together the events and repercussions of the explosion. Beginning with Silas, the teenager leaves his bong in June's shed on the day that he worked on the yard at June's house. Terrified of being caught, he creeps back to June's house that night to find Luke and her arguing in the kitchen about marriage. Luke wants to marry her, but June says that Luke is the type of person that someone like her hooks up with after marriage. Luke storms off while June prepares tea on the stove and June quickly followed him. Silas hears a loud clicking coming from the machine, but is terrified to be caught. He runs to the shed, collects his bong, then, on a whim, fiddles with the stove until the clicking stops.

June leaves Wells to stay at her friend Maxine's cottage in Litchfield County, Connecticut. After a time of recuperation there, she gets in her car and travels west towards Washington State. All the while, she reads about and visits the places that Lolly mentioned in her infrequent letters to her mother. June visits national parks, hotels, and even gas stations about which Lolly wrote in an attempt to reconnect with some idea of her daughter. Finally, June winds up in the Moonstone Inn in Moclips, Washington State. June stays there for the majority of the novel while the kindly cleaner named Cissy brings her soup and tries to nurse June back to health. June wanders the beach and thinks of how she refused Luke's proposals of marriage. The night of Lolly's wedding, she finally resolved to say yes to his proposal. Tragically, he died that very day.

Lydia is little better off than June. Lydia, a beautiful and curvaceous woman, was always the center of attention in high school. Boys leered at her and girls spread nasty rumors about her. To protect herself, she began dating Earl Morey, a town bully who made her laugh. Earl's protective sphere saved her from the worst of the gossips, but, when they married soon after high school, he began beating her each night after drinking himself into a stupor. Lydia, who cleaned the local motel during the day, had an affair with George, a black man from the south whose son was recovering from a drug overdose in Wells. George left the next day and Lydia became pregnant with her son Luke. When Earl saw that the boy was clearly not his own, he left Lydia who then continued to work and support herself and Luke who became an all-star swimming athlete in high school. Lydia eventually met Rex, a drug dealer who was kind to Lydia. Rex used Luke's car to traffic large amounts of cocaine. The police arrested Rex who then blamed Luke and



even convinced Lydia to testify against her son. Lydia and Luke spent years estranged until June convinced him to make amends with his mother. She lost Luke when June lost the rest of her family as well.

Lydia eventually finds her way to the Moonstone Inn and stays with June after Silas confesses his role in the stove's explosion. Each character can finally begin to heal after their losses because there are no more lies or secrets to keep them from the truth of the incident.



Chapters 1 - 6

Summary

Bill Clegg's *Did You Ever Have a Family* begins with Alan Shapiro's poem, "Song and Dance" which starts with the words, "Did you ever have a family". While Clegg separates his book into chapters labeled only with character names, for the sake of clarity, the chapters will be numbered from 1 to 32. After this epigraph, Silas, a pot-smoking 15-year-old, wakes up to the blare of sirens at 6 a.m. in Chapter 1. Before leaving his bedroom, he leans out the window of his home in Wells, Connecticut and smokes from his bong as he listens to the wailing sirens. He wonders if the night before was a dream, then hears his father call his name.

In Chapter 2, June recognizes that she must leave after a gas leak in her house caused an explosion from which her boyfriend Luke, her daughter Lolly, her ex-husband Tom, and Lolly's fiancée Will died. She thinks back on how the police questioned her asking if Luke had any grudge against her and how she rushed plans for the funerals and had been able to use the flowers meant for the wedding to decorate the graves. Her friend Maxine called to tell June that June could stay in her cottage. June decides to drive madly away from Maxine's cottage and head West. Without any documents of identification including a driver's license, she drives until she sees Connecticut disappear from view.

Chapter 3's Edith, the flower arranger hired for Lolly's wedding, thinks about how young and beautiful Lolly and her fiancée were when they hired her for their wedding. Edith considers how weekenders from New York City come and take the best of Wells. June, originally from the city, dated the black, young man, over 20 years her junior, from Wells named Luke Morey. Edith looks back on her time in Wells and gossips about how Lydia Morey gave birth to Luke while married to the redheaded, freckle-faced Earl Morey. Earl and Lydia divorced and Lydia raised Luke by herself. After high school, Luke went to jail for a few months on a cocaine smuggling charge. Edith used daisies intended for the wedding for the funeral of the four who died in the explosion of June's house.

Clegg focuses on Lydia in Chapter 4 who cleans houses for a living. Lydia sits in a diner booth sipping a coffee while a gaggle of town women chat in the booth behind her about their children's weddings, universities, and scholarships. In the 6 months since Luke, her son, died, she has been alone at home watching television and going to the café. The gossips behind her move on to talk about the wedding and slander her son Luke. Lydia stands, screams at them, and almost slaps the loudest gossip then rushes out of the diner. After prison, Luke only began speaking to Lydia again at the behest of June. Once, the mother and son saw each other in the grocery store and he said, "Go away, ghost". Lydia considers these moments as she walks home.

Rick, the caterer hired for Lolly's wedding, considers how he was never paid the \$20,000 for catering the wedding and how he would not have accepted the money even



if June Reid had tried to pay him in Chapter 5. Rick, a friend of Luke's from elementary and high school, considers his relationship with June. Luke was a stellar athlete who earned scholarships to swim at Stanford and other top schools and had his pick of girls in high school. One day he got snagged for smuggling cocaine then spent 11 months in prison. When he got out of jail, he set up a landscaping company in Wells and made a decent living then started living with June. After a monthly spaghetti dinner, Rick heard Dirk Morey yell, "This rich cunt pays for it" about June. Rick wailed on Dirk until Luke pulled him off the drunken Morey. After Rick's reminiscences, he states that he does not believe that Luke was responsible for the explosion despite what the townspeople think.

Chapter 6 follows Rebecca, co-owner along with her partner Kelly of the motel called the Moonstone. June, who told the couple that her name was Jane, found her way to the Moonstone and took a room that she hardly ever left until Cissy, the Native American cleaner of the motel, finally forced her out to clean the room. Strong and reserved, the day after gay marriage was legalized in Washington state, Cissy told Rebecca and Kelly that she was an ordained minister who could perform the ceremony if they ever want to get married.

Analysis

In this first section, the reader sees Clegg's particular style and must adjust to his choices in terms of literary presentation. For example, the author breaks the story up, not with chapter numbers, but with character names. In other words, instead of writing "Chapter 1", Clegg only gives a name, in the case of the first chapter this name is "Silas". While this difference is notable in and of itself, one must consider the effect that not labelling chapters has on the novel. Without the indication of sequential numbers, the novel flows far more fluidly. The character name at the beginning of each chapter gives the reader a base for understanding the narration changes between sections.

The change in perspective and narration from chapter to chapter gives the novel a diverse and more comprehensive feel, but it also makes the novel far more difficult to follow. The overall reader experience in Section 1 is strenuous. Each chapter features the perspective of a different character, all of whom unfamiliar to the reader before that chapter, and the perspectives differ from each other in both language and style. For instance, Silas's opening in Chapter 1 features a certain teenage lexicon that includes words such as stash, pot, drag, and trippy while the overall style is also becomes more informal and fragmented. On the other hand, June's chapter gives the reader a more complex diction with perfectly formed, if distressed, phrases. This whiplash back and forth between characters who have what seems to be only tenuous connections forces the reader to struggle through the opening section.

Not only does perspective change and Clegg refuses to follow scholastic writing guidelines like marking lines of dialogue with quotations, he begins the novel in medias res, in the middle of things. Just as the characters try to piece together the night in which June lost her family and her boyfriend, so too must the reader do the same.



In medias res, reader has to catch up with the action and slowly piece together the plot. The central event of the novel is the explosion of June Reid's house on the morning of her daughter's wedding. Lolly, her fiancé, June's ex-husband, and her boyfriend Luke all die while June watches from the front yard. After this horrific event, Clegg sets the story in the ensuing months. While he gives the characters as they are after the event, each one thinks back on their recent or distant past with one of the people involved in the explosion. Because the reader does not know exactly what happened until information from a few chapters slowly leaks through, the reader is in the same position as many of the characters in the story who are also trying to piece together the past. In other words, the reader knows about as little as the individual characters. In this way, the author aligns both reader and character to form a bond of sorts, if only in perspective and lack of knowledge.

One of the story's major dichotomies becomes evident in this section. The difference between small town Wells, Connecticut and big city New York permeates each character's mindset. For example, Rick considers how June is from the City and how she acts in a way that is different from the rest of them. Similarly, he sees Luke as someone too big or too great to fit into Wells, not even to mention he was the only black man in the town. Not only do the townspeople hold a grudge against New Yorkers, they also disparage anyone who comes from outside their minuscule town.

When Lydia sits in a diner in Chapter 4, one of the women behind her gossips about one of the girls in town marrying a boy "from New Jersey, she explains. "Big Italian family," she adds, and just in case anyone missed the point: "They don't know any better". In this case, not only are the inhabitants of Wells prejudiced and narrow minded, but also bitterly parochial and dismissive of anyone outside their town. This group of ladies represent the pressure to acculturate that pervades the town. The women's banter and gossiping reflects their need to enforce a status quo. They do not accept differences or variations in their town, like Luke, any more than they accept outsiders, such as June. Luke, black and born to a white mother, is a variation that defies their sense of normalcy just as June, a big city woman who decides to move to Wells permanently, does the same.

Once Lydia finally confronts the women, the reader sees the novel's first instance of real-time dialogue. Instead of marking Lydia's spoken words with quotations, Clegg uses italics. Italicizing words in a third person narration usually signals that the italicized words are internal thoughts of the character. By breaking this writing practice, the author both challenges the norms of the modern literary tradition and almost unnecessarily complicates his style. The italicized dialogue represents a conflict of the internal and external. Are the characters really speaking to each other or is Lydia simply imagining how the scene would play out if she spoke? In Chapter 4, the first is far more likely. Just as he does in much of Section 1, Bill Clegg breaks literary conventions and intentionally complicates the narrative in order to force the reader to delve deeply into the tragic tale of June Reid and her family.



Discussion Question 1

The novel focuses on the aftermath of the explosion of June Reid's house then traces through the past with a constantly shifting perspective. What effect does this format have on the book's structure?

Discussion Question 2

How are each of the characters in Section 1 linked?

Discussion Question 3

Each chapter begins with a different character speaking in the present tense who then thinks about the past and uses the past tense. What purpose does this backstory form serve for the novel as a whole?

Vocabulary

gurgles, minimize, squawk, stench, magnificent, bulging, dilated, forensic, molten, marauding, makeshift, obscenity, stabilize, prescribe, locust, catastrophe, snagged, olympian, settlements, wiry



Chapters 7 - 12

Summary

In Chapter 7, the author focuses on Lydia, Luke's mother, using the past tense rather than the present tense of the first section. A telemarketer named Winton called her in December. This incident made her think of the wall by her telephone that had people's numbers scratched into it. One number was that of her ex-mother-in-law Connie Morey. Lydia was in love with Connie's son, Earl, because he made her laugh. After high school, they got married, but their relationship went sour quickly when Earl, instead of coming home for dinner, went directly to the bar. He came home each night drunk, then hit Lydia each night. When Luke was born, Earl threw her and the black-skinned baby out. She had one serious relationship after Earl with a man named Rex. June Reid, Luke's girlfriend, made Luke reach out to Lydia after jail and then reached out to Lydia herself despite Lydia's antagonism. After Luke died, Lydia was the beneficiary of his life insurance policy. With the money, she stopped cleaning houses and retreated into her house until Winton, the telemarketer, told her she had won the lottery.

Chapter 8 follows a desolate June who thinks back upon her life and the chapter reverts to the present tense. June's childhood friend Annette, after June's insistence, went to summer camp in Pennsylvania. June quickly ditched Annette to stay in the popular girls' cabin. Annette left the camp the next day. June returns from her musings to find herself in Montana's Glacier National Park where she walks through the midsummer day in order to retrace Lolly's footsteps before she died. She thinks of how she never argued custody when she divorced her husband Adam after an NYU student of his accused him of sexual harassment and then she caught him with another student.

Chapter 9 changes to follow Rebecca, who narrates in the present tense using the first person a month later than Chapter 8. As the co-owner, with her partner Kelly, of the Moonstone Inn, Rebecca worries about June who is staying in the motel. Rebecca thinks back on her reasons for leaving Seattle. Penny, her best friend, wanted to leave Worcester, Massachusetts where the two grew up. Penny and Rebecca left Massachusetts to live in New York City where Penny embraced the lesbian scene more quickly than Rebecca who remained hesitant about the wild lifestyle of drugs and liquor that many of the girls had. Penny and Rebecca drifted apart until Penny overdosed. Rebecca sent her to rehab in Seattle where Rebecca visited her often. On one of these visits, she met Kelly, a hotel worker like Rebecca herself. The two quickly become intimate and continue working apart until a couple kids raped and killed Penny. After the funeral, Kelly took the distraught Rebecca to the Moonstone which they then bought after quitting their jobs.

In Chapter 10, Clegg follows George whose son Robert married a woman named Joy in California. George's twin daughters rarely see their distant older brother who, even as a child, was solitary, bright, and quiet. With a real estate business and a daughter with cancer, George rarely found the time for Robert who then went to a private high school



in Connecticut. Robert overdosed on heroin during high school and George flew out right away and stayed in a motel in Wells where he met Lydia.

Chapter 11 introduces Dale, the father of Will who intended to marry Lolly, who narrates in the first person with the present tense. Dale says that Will was always socially aware and ambitious. He went to school in Massachusetts, far away from his parents in Washington State. As a child, Will worked with Cissy cleaning the Moonstone's rooms. Will got involved with the native reserve and carved his own canoe then met Lolly Reid, June's daughter, while at school. Pru, Will's sister and Dale's daughter, went to stay with Lolly and June to get to know her brother's fiancée and family. Once, she saw June sobbing, when June saw Pru, she asked if she had ever had a family.

In Chapter 12, Kelly, one of the owners of the Moonstone motel, walks along the beach behind the Moonstone and recounts a legend of the sea swallowing sleeping girls who then turn into mermaids whose magic keeps the Quinault virgins from harm. Kelly thinks that her family gave her a sense of security just like the mermaids give the natives. June, under the alias of Jane, has Cissy as a safety net.

Analysis

Section 2 continues to present the reader with the difficulty of the leaping narration. Connections between chapters are only evident towards the end of each chapter if even then. The reader is always at a disadvantage and struggles to make sense of the novel. For example, in Chapter 10, the reader gets a totally new character in George who references an entire set of equally new characters. It is only with the very last word of the chapter that something familiar to the rest of the novel presents itself. George remarks that in Connecticut he met Lydia. Lydia, the mother of Luke who dated June, cleaned the motel that George stayed at while taking care of his son Robert who was in the hospital and then rehab after a heroin overdose. This example demonstrates the difficulty of Clegg's sporadic, shotgun-style narration. The author has a cast of characters in mind, then fleshes out each one with either direct chapters taking on that character's perspective or with relatives or friends who can flesh out other characters' backgrounds.

The characters who died in the explosion at June's house do not have any chapters with their perspective. Lolly, Luke, and Will are only familiar to the reader through the people who knew them. While the reader can get a sense of their personalities through characters like June or, in this section, Dale who give background on the dead characters. The effect that this disparate narrative structure has on the novel is a one of not only confusion for the reader, but also one of recollection. Every single chapter features a specific character who goes about some mundane activity in the present then reminisces about the past. In fact, some chapters do not even give the characters anything to do in the present. Instead, chapters like Chapter 11 with Dale simply introduce a character who then speaks only about the past. The importance of past events on the present drives the novel. With very little present action or development,



Clegg relies on the back stories that he gives each character. Clegg's fragmented narration is indicative of his engagement in the tradition of postmodernism.

As seen both in Section 1 and 2, Clegg uses a disparate narration to follow a massive and baffling cast of characters who come from diverse backgrounds, settings, and classes. His encompassing scope speaks to his urge to present radically different perspectives while maintaining a minimal amount of consistency and continuity. Consequently, *Did You Ever Have a Family* is a postmodern work because it employs narratorial fragmentation seen in the author's use of split perspectives, factual dispersion, and temporal disassemblage. In other words, the novel is an example of the postmodernism because the characters are seemingly unrelated to one and other, grounding and cohesive evidence is rare, and the reader starts each chapter without a sense of continuous action. The overall intention for this use of postmodern fragmentation purports the view that the world of these characters is chaotic and incoherently random. Where Clegg drifts away from his postmodern contemporaries is the founding idea that the only way to make sense of this unsound universe is through family.

In Chapter 11, Dale recounts his daughter Pru's time with June and Lolly. One day, Pru finds June sobbing and when Pru asks her what is wrong, June asks, "Did you ever have a family?". Whenever the author writes the title of the work, it is an occasion for analysis. These words reek of significance because they are exactly the same as the title of the novel. It is here that Clegg first nails his book's purpose into a simple six word linchpin. From the diasporic chapters, the reader finally receives a clear statement of purpose and union. Despite the postmodern fragmentation of the story as a whole, Clegg argues that the secret of making sense of this unsound and chaotic existence is family. Family is the one thing that grounds a person and connects them to other people in a way that provides a concrete foundation in an otherwise wild and random world. Kelly reinforces this argument in Chapter 12 when, at the end of the chapter, she thinks, "Thank God [June] has someone to look out for her. Thank God any of us do". Between Pru's grateful realization that her family has provided her with a sense of security that she could never have found elsewhere and Kelly's recognition of the importance of family members looking out for one and other, the author firmly solidifies his intention to assert the importance and necessity of family.

Discussion Question 1

How does Clegg use the book's title in this section and to what end?

Discussion Question 2

The relations among characters is sometimes thin, but always present. How are each of the characters in this section related to one and other?



Discussion Question 3

How are drugs and sexuality presented? How does one affect the other, if at all?

Vocabulary

dolled, mocking, mimic, instigated, heaving, gibberish, demon, hussy, snickering, inexplicably, commemorating, emphasized, purgatory, lucrative, anonymously, brash, escapism, acquaintances, nodes, obligation



Chapters 13 - 19

Summary

Chapter 13 follows Lydia as she thinks of how the telemarketing scammer, Winton, compliments her. She sends \$750 to an address in Queens thinking that the scam will end, but instead the money is sent back to her. As she exits the diner she frequents every day, she sees one of Luke's teenage employees, Silas, on the street. Once he sees her, he flees. Chapter 14 picks up just after Silas wheels his bike around to continue following Lydia and admiring her body. He dozes off and accidentally gets too close to Lydia who freezes.

In Chapter 15, June pulls off the highway on her way towards Salt Lake City to fix a flat tire. An elderly man at the station named Brody Cook changes her tire for her and hands her Will and Lolly's duffelbag from the back trunk when he gets the spare tire. June retraces her final moments with her daughter as she blindly runs towards the highway until Brody stops her. She cries for the first time after the accident.

Chapter 16 returns to George, Luke's father and Lydia's lover, who stayed at the Betsy, Wells County's motel, where Lydia cleaned the rooms. The day George's son moved from the ICU to rehab, George met Lydia and they began telling each other about their lives. Two days before George left Wells, Connecticut, they slept together. George wonders if Lydia remembers those hours with him.

In Chapter 17, June stays in a motel room in just off the highway after her near suicide. Brody mildly flirts with her when she tries to give him money for the motel room and refuses the cash. Going through Lolly's things, she finds a notebook full of sketches. She finds one of the Moonstone, a motel out west. The owner of the motel bangs on June's door and forces her out of the room.

The author returns to Lydia's storyline in Chapter 18 as she walks home from the diner. Just after Silas accidentally gets too close to her, she spins and shrieks at him to get away from her. Silas flees and Lydia runs into her house, As soon as she gets inside, someone pounds on the door. Instead of Silas, Lydia finds a young woman at the door who then smacks Lydia and calls her a thief for scamming money off of the woman's father. The woman tells Lydia that she needs to stop then leaves. Winton calls her home just after the woman storms away and, after a pause, Lydia tells him her story.

Chapter 19 is a letter from Lolly, as she stays in the Moonstone, to her mother. Lolly accused June saying that she chose her career over her husband and daughter. Lolly never knew that her father cheated on June. At Will's urging, she wrote this letter with the hope that one day she would actually give it to June. She finishes writing that she loves June and that she wants to have what Will has with his parents.



Analysis

Section 3 is far more consistent and cohesive than the previous two sections. Clegg finally begins to settle his story down and to focus seriously on a few characters rather than continuing to give the reader diverse perspectives every chapter. In Chapter 13, Lydia notices that Silas is outside the diner. She ignores him then continues home. Chapter 14 picks up directly after this scene with Silas's perspective as he follows Lydia home. In this way, the story hones in on a few select characters rather than focusing on the massive cast of characters that introduce themselves from chapter to chapter. To understand this phenomenon, one must consider characters in tiers of importance. Lydia and June are the book's protagonists. Silas, Rebecca and Kelly, George, and Cissy are second tier characters because they interact with Lydia and June, but act in such a way that highlights and demonstrates different aspects of the protagonists' personalities. All the other characters are tertiary and act only to flesh out either the secondary or primary characters.

In using this classification system to analyze Chapters 12 and 13, Silas is a secondary character and Winton is tertiary. They both focus on Lydia. Winton, throughout the entire novel, only interacts with Lydia over the phone. He does not talk to any other character and only presents himself when calling Lydia. On the other hand, Silas has a family and chapters that feature his perspective making him more important to the story. As Silas stalks Lydia, he notices Lydia's "metronomic perfection". In other words, he stares at her body as she walks home. Silas mentions that he has been following Lydia for weeks now. His fascination with Lydia is representative of the novel's overall focus on Lydia and June.

The two women become objects of attention and admiration, but also hatred depending on the character. Almost all of the chapters feature characters who comment upon or note Lydia's sensual body or June's classy attractiveness as they put it. Lydia's mesmerizingly curvaceous beauty causes her more trouble than she believes it is worth. In high school, the other girls tortured her for her development out of jealousy and insecurity and the boys wrote her lewd notes. Neither June nor Lydia can control the shape of their bodies, but, regardlessly, they are judged for their physicalities. While neither is without blame, they become victims of others' expectations. They must either conform or react to the conclusions people draw from their figures. The other mothers in Wells see Lydia as a whore and a freak whose body draws the eye of their husbands. Consequently, when Lydia finally finds a sympathetic man in George, she has an affair. June is the prissy, rich lady from New York City who found a small town boy toy in Luke, Lydia's son. Then, she refused to marry him. Both these women are prisoners to their situations who must either fit the expectations of those around them or break their moulds. Either way, they are reactionary characters operating from a position of weakness.



Discussion Question 1

How are Lydia and June objects? Do they fit their moulds or break them?

Discussion Question 2

What is the importance of the motel, the temporary home? Think of the Moonstone and the Betsy.

Discussion Question 3

Structurally, how does the novel change from Section 2 to Section 3? What characters begin to take the forefront and which fall to the wayside?

Vocabulary

ludicrous, lewd, cackling, mortifying, jagged, dazzled, nostalgia, affectionate, spellbound, metronomic, hustler, mutt, trippy, spectacular, presence, erosion, arrangement, murky, ascent, reckoning



Chapters 20 - 27

Summary

In Chapter 20, Silas bikes to a park near his house and smokes weed to calm down after his incident with Lydia. He hallucinates and sees a dragon that urges him to go. Terrified, Silas rushes home.

Chapter 21 then turns to June as she drives to the Moonstone. She thinks of how Luke urged her to play Frisbee with her in the yard one day and she refused. The Frisbee lay in the yard for weeks until one day it was gone. June continues along the highway.

Dale and his family, in Chapter 22, arrive at the Moonstone to find June's car in the parking lot. Dale says that he blames June for the accident that killed his son most of all because she should have fixed the rickety, old stove. Dale's son, Mike, did not speak to his parents for a time after the accident because they had not sued the town for negligence after the town bulldozed the house the day after the explosion. Pru, Will's sister and Dale's daughter, came home from graduate school to be with her family. Dale, his wife, and his two remaining children checked into the Moonstone.

Lydia tells Winton about Rex, the man who convinced her to testify against her son, in Chapter 23. Rex, a drug dealer, would disappear for days only to return with new cars or motorcycles. After Luke graduated high school, Rex borrowed the car, the police pulled him over and found cocaine, and Rex blamed Luke. Lydia testified against Luke and when the police searched her house, they found cocaine in Luke's room. Lydia, distraught, carefully hangs up the phone.

In Chapter 24, Silas returns to the pit where June's house stood nine months after the explosion. He remembers that fateful night when he forgot his knapsack, which contained his bong and weed, at June's house after doing work there for Luke. Silas snuck back to June's house where he heard Luke and June fight as she put a kettle on the stove. Luke stormed off into the woods, then June followed, but forgot the ticking stove. Silas moved towards the house.

Chapter 25 turns to Cissy who speaks of her tall, good looking father who had a silent, pleasant air about him just like Will Landis, Lolly's fiancée. As a child, Will worked with Cissy at the Moonstone each day for a dollar. Will took an interest in Cissy's native roots and even built a canoe under that tutelage of Joe, the Quinault elder nearby.

Silas, outside June's house the night of the explosion, tried to turn off the gas of the stove in Chapter 26. The ticking stopped, but he still smelled the gas. A worried Silas fled then smoked weed. Chapter 27 turns to June on the same night. She fiddles with the stove then chases after Luke, but cannot find him. June finds her way home then sleeps under Lolly's wedding tent in the back yard, waiting for Luke to tell her that she will marry him.



Analysis

Section 4 finally begins to portray the most fundamental events of the novel. Structurally, the novel is complex. The previous sections deal only with the events following the fatal explosion at June's house. It is only in Section 4 that Clegg begins to trace the events that led to the stove's explosion at June's house which killed Luke, Lolly, Will, and Adam. Of the three, Adam, June's cheating ex-husband, is the unsympathetic and almost irrelevant to the characters who recount the story's action.

In Chapter 20, Silas grapples with his horrid encounter with Lydia. When she wheels around and screams at him to leave her alone, he sees her not as the sensual object he had hoped for, but as a person. She is too human and too real for him to continue to view her simply as a hot mom. When his imagination crashes into the reality and humanity of Lydia, she can no longer exist simply as an object of lust. Later in this section, the reader comes to understand Silas's immense fascination and obsession with Lydia. Silas played a critical part in the explosion of June's house.

Silas was the one who turned of the dial that kept clicking in order to warn the residents that the stove's gas was on. While he thought that he had turned the gas off, in reality, he killed everyone in the house because he could not bring himself to call to one of the residents and warn them. The symbolic dragon that plagues him whenever he smokes weeks is born from his crippling guilt. In this way, Clegg tortures and pulls the idea of guilt and culpability in a way that does not exclude any of his major characters. Concerning the stove, June should have replaced the stove and Silas should have warned them. Each character has a stain in their past that defines how they comport themselves in the present. Lydia reveals her stain to Winton. She testifies against her own son in a court of law at the urgings of Rex, a man who leaves her directly after Luke went to prison. She even convinces Luke to take a plea bargain and plead guilty. No one in Clegg's novel can exist without some error of character that defines their relations with one and other.

A further point of analytical interest comes to light in this section as well. Namely, the story's internal structure becomes a central facet. In almost every chapter, the characters recollect some past event involving someone who died in the accident. They speak to a personal memory that fleshes out the dead in a way that presents them as if they were characters who were still living. The novel is almost exclusively made up of this internal structure in which recollection and personal thought are everything because dialogue is almost nonexistent.

Section 4, in its final chapters, at last gives the events of the fateful night that defines the novel. Both June and Silas recount their part in the explosion that killed four people. The author uses these episodes to play with the reader's knowledge of the situation. The outcome, in which the explosion kills the people sleeping in the house, is set in stone. The reader knows how these scenes will end and Clegg masterfully manipulates the reader's outside knowledge by heightening suspense and including sentimental points that have the reader cringing for the sake of the characters involved. For



instance, when June waits for Luke in the wedding tent, she agrees to marry him. When Silas turns the dial that cuts the ticking, he kills the chance that the residents had of stopping the gas before it was too late. All told, Section 4 includes the novel's major rising action and awaits the climax of the next section.

Discussion Question 1

How does Silas come to play a role in the explosion, and how does this role affect him as a character?

Discussion Question 2

What is June's grieving process? Does she confront her grief?

Discussion Question 3

Why did Lydia betray her son and for whom did she betray him?

Vocabulary

lusty, grieving, disfigured, hallucinating, kaleidoscopic, frankly, cynical, irresistible, treacherous, fussing, eradicate, scapegoat, riddle, deposition, ragged, hyperventilating, adrenaline, makeshift, nozzle, makeshift



Chapters 28 - 32

Summary

In Chapter 28, Silas pedals back to town at 3 a.m. and visits the rubble of June's old house. He remembers how Luke was always a good guy and how he never got angry at Silas and the others even when they goofed off. Silas's mother, after the accident, disparaged Luke as a druggie then spoke the same way about Luke's mother, Lydia. Silas followed Lydia thinking of her household as her guardian, but he could never muster the courage to tell her the truth about his role in the accident. He returns to Lydia's house and knocks, intent on telling her the truth about the accident. She threatens to call the police but he will not budge.

Lydia, in Chapter 29, buckles her seat belt in preparation for the first flight of her life. She has heard Silas's tormented relation of the events of that famous night in which her only child died. While she initially wanted to wring Silas's neck, she understood how decisions could be made out of fear and a deluded sense of survival. She searched for George on the internet and even called his office, but could not bring herself to speak with him. She bought a ticket heading to Atlanta, Georgia to tell George King about their son Luke, but when she received Mimi Landis's letter informing her of June's whereabouts, she changed her ticket's destination to Seattle, Washington.

Chapter 30 recounts the morning after June's night in the wedding pavilion. She reminisces about the first time that she saw him and how his beauty dumbfounded her. She hears Luke moving quickly around the house and him shout her name. She resolves to ask his forgiveness and accept his proposal.

After June's minute chapter, the narration returns to Lydia in Chapter 31 on her way to Moclips and the Moonstone to find June. She realizes how little she knows about the world after her sheltered existence in Wells, but perseveres. She wears a black wrap and carries a suitcase of newspaper clippings, pictures, and other memorabilia all involving Luke. Reese, her cabbie, pulls into the Moonstone parking lot. She booked a flight the next week to Atlanta, but knows that she will not be going there soon. George will continue to be there as he has for years and she will stay with June for as long as she is needed. Lydia knocks on the door of room 6 to find a withered and mute June. After sobbing, she tells June about Silas. June's grabs Lydia's hand then let's her head fall into Lydia's lap. Soon, she is asleep.

The novel finishes with Cissy in Chapter 32. Cissy marries Rebecca and Kelly, the owners of the Moonstone, a month after Lydia's arrival. Cissy says that although life is hard, we must stick it out. Cissy speaks in the future tense foretelling June and Lydia's slow road back to life, Rebecca and Kelly's continued love, and the Landis's return each year. She says that they will all grow old and no one will remember them or what happened in their lives, but the waves will sound the same way to them as they did the first time Cissy and the others heard them.



Analysis

Did You Ever Have a Family finishes with a snapshot-sized chapters that contain the climactic moments in each of the main characters storylines. This final section features the end of the story's rising action, the climax, and the resolution. Besides the formatic changes between the longer chapters of the first 4 sections and this fifth section, each chapter, besides the last, in the final section ends with a cliffhanger that pushes the action forward to the next chapter in a way that builds suspense despite the fact that the reader already knows how the first temporal storyline finishes. The explosion of June's house begins the novel, but also serves as the climax because Clegg saves the details of the accident for the end of the book.

During this final section of the book, Clegg plays with his characters' expectations and the ulterior knowledge of the reader to create suspense and underline the tragedy of the incident. For instance, June resolves to marry Luke on the night of the explosion. She is finally at peace and content with her situation, but then Luke dies along with her daughter, her ex-husband, and her daughter's fiancée. While June is perfectly content, the reader knows the tragedy that is soon to follow June's peace-bringing resolution.

Clegg also highlights the idea of blindness and lack of connection among characters. When Silas considers his mother, whose hatred for and jealousy of Lydia blind her, he remembers when she finally let Silas work for Luke. She resisted him at first because she believed that Luke was a druggie who would only corrupt her child. The situational irony of this exchange is painfully obvious to the reader, but the characters themselves cannot see past their circumstances. The irony is that Silas's mother believes Luke is a drug addict, when in reality his mother's boyfriend framed him, who will corrupt her son. The druggie is right under Silas's mother's roof. Silas himself is addicted to weed. He smokes multiple times a day and cannot function unless something is numbing his crippling guilt over the accident.

This idea of a lack of connection or a minimization of understanding between characters continues further in the section when June recounts the first time she saw Luke. His physical beauty was like that of a "sculpture or installation or painting so exquisite and so stirring that she could not take it all in at once". June minimizes Luke. Rather than seeing him as another complex and injured person, she limits him to his physical appearance. Luke's striking attractiveness is what brings the two together, but June cannot come to terms with the fact that he has his own wants and needs. Unlike a painting of a statue, he needs more than an appreciative audience. He needs a partner. Going back to June on the night of the incident, she finally comes to terms with the fact that she must value his needs just as she values her own. She decides to marry Luke on the night of the explosion. Presumably, they would have lived on, married, and been happy had the explosion not occurred. Minimization does not only haunt Luke, but also Lydia, Lydia Morey is gorgeous and has the figure of a "pin-up model" as George puts it. She finds protectors and guards who torture her just as much as they shelter her from the spite of others. Her ex-husband beat her when they finally married, but he also came with a sphere of protection that kept others in the town from directly confronting



her. In this way, Clegg finalizes the novel's opinion on physicality and its influence on character interaction.

Discussion Question 1

How does Cissy finish the story? What role does she play throughout the novel and how does her role change in the final chapter?

Discussion Question 2

How does the author use the reader's overall knowledge of the plot to create suspense?

Discussion Question 3

In what ways are Lydia and June similar? How do they differ?

Vocabulary

wrapped, culprit, embellished, judgment, unaware, demonstrates, nudged, misguided, chronologically, rehearsal, spooled, agony, complicated, pecked, confirmation, authority, exquisite, installation, collision, nauseated



Characters

June Reid

June is the story's central figure. Even when the story does not follow her perspective, the characters consider her and the way of life that she represents to the small town Wells inhabitants. June is from New York City where she married Adam, a New York University professor, and had a daughter named Lolly. As an art exhibitor, she worked specifically with painters in the city. When she found out about Adam's affairs with his students and one of the girls filed a lawsuit against him, she divorced Adam.

After the divorce, Adam and June allowed Lolly to decide with which parent she would like to live. Lolly chose Adam because she did not understand the circumstances of the divorce. Subsequently, June went to London to open her own art gallery. After pursuing a successful career in London for some years, she returned to America and bought a house in Wells, Connecticut.

Soon after she moved back to Wells, a storm hit June's house and caused damage in the yard. She hired the young, handsome landscaper Luke who later became her boyfriend. The two moved in together and, as their relationship developed, June forced Luke to make amends with his mother, from whom he was estranged. Luke then insisted that she do the same with Lolly, her daughter.

June, attractive, slim, and refined, stuck out in Wells as a rich woman from the city. When she took up with the only other person, Luke, in town who was more out of place, the two became even more of a subject of derision and scrutiny. Luke, black and an ex-convict, soon asked June to marry him. She refused twice and said that Luke was not the type of person someone like her married. He was the kind of person that someone like her took up with after they were married. June quickly felt ashamed of her behavior and determined to accept his proposal.

June's house then exploded and Luke died along with her daughter. Distraught, June began retracing Lolly's steps. She went out west to the parks, restaurants, and cities that Lolly described in her letters to June. Finally, June works her way to the Moonstone Inn located in Moclips, Washington State. She wastes away at the Inn despite the help of Cissy until Lydia finds her and the two begin to recover from their losses together.

Lydia Morey

Lydia is the novel's other major character besides June. Physically, Lydia is in her 40's and is strikingly beautiful. She is curvaceous and well developed to the extent that nearly every male character in the book remarks upon her appearance. From an early age, her physical development drew both leering gazes from men and cold stares from women. In grade school, Silas's mother and a group of girls confronted her in the changeroom and accused her of stuffing her bra. In a traumatic experience, the girls



tore off her bra to find that Lydia was simply more developed than them. They called her a freak, then left her in tears.

Similar episodes mark Lydia's young life until she started dating Earl Morey in high school. Earl, a member of the vast Morey family, had a vicious temper and was something of a bully at the school. Once Lydia began dating him, she found a sphere of protection in his intimidating circle of family and friends. No longer did the other girls pick on her or boys hit on her. He also made her laugh. They married soon after high school.

Their honeymoon phase was depressingly short. Earl started frequenting the town bar each night instead of coming home to dinner. When he did come home, he was blackout drunk and would beat Lydia then pass out. Terrified of him and sick of her circumstances, she had an affair with George, a black man from Georgia. After she had the baby and Earl found out that it was not his son, Lydia and her newly born son, Luke, moved in with Lydia's mother.

Lydia's only other serious male companion was Rex who, unbeknownst to Lydia, was a drug dealer. Rex borrowed Luke's car one weekend and a police officer found cocaine bricks in the trunk. Rex blamed Luke and even convinced Lydia to condemn her own son in court. Luke spent seven years in jail and Rex left the day after the trial concluded. Alone once again, Lydia continued cleaning the local motel and houses in the town until, years after Luke got out of prison, June's house exploded. Lydia lost her son, with whom she had begun to make amends, and June lost her partner.

Lydia, with the life insurance on Luke's life, stopped cleaning houses and lived alone. A telemarketer named Winton called her each day and Lydia related her life's story to him. She wasted away until one night she caught Silas stalking her. She screamed at him, then fled. That night, Silas came to Lydia's house and he told her that he had been at June's house that night and had tried to turn the stove's gas off, but only succeeded in stopping the warning ticking of the oven. He played a part in her son's death. Afterwards, Lydia goes to the Moonstone Inn to find June and the novel ends with them both staying at the Inn.

Silas

Silas is a guilt-ridden 15-year-old whose accidental role in the explosion led to the deaths of June's family and Lolly's fiancée. Throughout the novel, Clegg changes his narrative style to match what he believes to be the mode in which teenagers speak. Consequently, Silas swears constantly and his narration contains contractions. Silas is the first character that the author presents to the reader. Silas wakes to get ready for school and hears a string of ambulances. Worried, he smokes pot then goes to school.

Silas's obsession with smoking weed marks him as the only narrative character who does drugs. While the reader does not know why he smokes as much as he does at first, soon it comes to light that Silas played a critical part in the stove explosion at



June's house. He worked for Luke's landscaping company and, on the day of Lolly's wedding, he slacked off with the other teenagers and smoked weed. That evening, he remembered that he had left his bong and weed in June's outhouse. He rushed over to the house and heard June fighting with Luke. Both of them storm off while the stove ticks ominously. Terrified to be caught, but also feeling that he must stop the gas, he runs into the kitchen and fiddles with the knobs. The ticking stops, but the gas does not. Towards the end of the novel, Silas finally unburdens himself by telling Lydia about how he was involved in the death of her son Luke.

Cissy

Cissy is a native woman who lives in Moclips, Washington. She cleans the rooms at the Moonstone Inn where she met Will and later meets June. Will introduced her to her own native heritage because Cissy was estranged from the community because her mother was not a native herself. Through Will, she connects to the local reserve, if only a little. Later in the novel, Cissy meets June who comes to the Moonstone to die. She tries to nurse June back to health as much as she can, but struggles to get past June's depression. Cissy is the final character to speak to the reader. In the final chapter, she recapitulates the story's major themes and says that each of the characters can begin to heal from their wounds. She also notes that, while life is a struggle, Cissy believes we are meant to endure.

Luke Morey

Luke dies before the novel begins in the explosion of June's house. The townspeople blame him for the accident because his mother's boyfriend framed him for drug trafficking when he was in high school. Luke, black, muscular, and "too big, too handsome, too something for the likes of us" as Rick puts it, stood out in Wells. He was born from an affair that Lydia had while married to Earl Morey. After he gets out of jail, Luke starts his own landscaping company in Wells where he eventually meets June. The two begin dating and Luke falls for her. He asks June to marry him twice, but she refuses both times.

Lolly Reid

Lolly is June and Adam's daughter who dies in the explosion at the beginning of the novel. The fateful accident occurs one the eve of Lolly's wedding to Will. The two of them decided to marry young and were deeply in love. Lolly was a special, help case for Will, while Will and his family were an attractive example of what a real family could be. She and Will traveled extensively throughout the United States leading up to their wedding. Lolly is dead before the novel starts. Her point of view is never given to the reader.



Rick

Rick is the caterer that June and Lolly hired for Lolly's wedding. He is one of the first to speak in the novel and he talks about Luke and June specifically. He and Luke went to high school together and he ardently defends Luke's character despite the popular opinion of the town that denounces him as a drug dealer. June never paid Rick for his services after the explosion. For the \$20,000 worth of food that he prepared, he never received a cent because June soon left after the death of her entire family. The reader later finds out that June had told her lawyer to pay off all of her expenses and sell her house. One can assume that the lawyer pocketed the money. Rick never complains about the massive loss of revenue, but his wife is not happy.

Kelly and Rebecca

These two are the owners of the Moonstone Inn in Moclips, Washington State. They meet when Kelly comes to Seattle to visit her friend Penny who is recovering from a heroin addiction. Rebecca quickly asks Kelly to go out with her and Kelly agrees. The two begin dating seriously. When a group of teenagers rape and kill Penny, Rebecca cares for her stricken partner. She eventually suggests that they buy a motel in Moclips and retire there. The two do so and hire Cissy to clean for them. The Moonstone becomes a central setting in the story when June, Lydia, and Will's family all visit in order to find some trace of their lost children. When gay marriage becomes legal in Washington, Cissy offers to marry them. The story finishes with this marriage.

George

George is a successful dentist from Georgia who stays in the motel in Wells and meets Lydia. He visits Wells to be with his son who overdosed on heroin. The manner in which George and Lydia meet is directly related to how Kelly and Rebecca met. George cares for his son just as Kelly cares for her friend, both of whom overdosed on heroin. Clegg seems to support the idea that love can be found in tragedy. George and Lydia have sex once. Lydia later gives birth to George's son, Luke, whose skin matches the dark skin of his father who is obviously not Lydia's husband's child. Her husband quickly leaves her.

Winton

Winton is the telemarketer who calls Lydia constantly. He becomes the only person that Lydia speaks to on a regular basis. The reader knows very little about him because he lies to Lydia. He swaps between telling her that he is a grad student simply paying his way through Oxford, Cambridge, or Harvard (the schools change each time), to telling her that he owns the telemarketing company himself. Like many of the characters, Winton is only a tool through which Lydia's personality is illuminated.



Will

Will is Lolly's fiancée and the only other person that Cissy ever found to be like her husband. He was incredibly interested in political activism and formed a strong bond with the Native American reserve in Moclips. The reader never receives Will's point of view and can only surmise his personality traits based on the accounts that his father gives because Will dies with his fiancée in the explosion of June's house.

Edith

Edith is the flower arranger, who thinks that the flowers in jelly jars from Lolly's wedding is childish. Despite being hired for the wedding, she complains about how her skills are undervalued. She arranges flowers, she does not put daisies in jelly bean jars. Edith gossips about the town in a slightly damaging way. She gives the reader the scoop on Luke's criminal past, talks about June's money, and trashes Lydia Morey. Edith has only one chapter of the novel and her only purpose is to give the reader background on the main characters before Clegg delves into these characters himself.



Symbols and Symbolism

Waves of Moclips

The waves of Moclips become symbolic points in the native folklore of Washington State. The native legend states that young virgins escaped into the ocean's embrace while crazed men chased them. These virgins become mermaids who then protect the chaste members of the town and the reserve. The waves are the sign other their open embrace. These waves feature prominently in the thinking of June, Kelly, and Will who all either scoff at the tale or find some personal truth in the idea of protectors watching over them. Since the novel focuses on the idea of family so heavily, the mermaids provide the embracing function of a family for those who lack one.

Lolly's Diary

June tries to retrace her daughter's steps in order to connect with her, albeit after her daughter's death. The tool with which she pursues her goal is her daughter's diary. She reads through this book and discovers parts of her daughter that she never understood or even knew about. It is through this book that she finds out that Lolly was a burgeoning artist and that she stayed at the Moonstone Inn and found a place on earth that was perfect.

Lydia's Telephone

Lydia retreats into a shell after her son Luke's death. She zombie-walks through a routine that keeps her alive, but does little else. The only interaction she has each day is on the telephone, speaking to the telemarketer named Winton. In this way, the phone becomes a symbol of her connection to another person and her outlet. She has never left Wells once in her life. Speaking to Winton on the phone gives her a connection to the outside world that she previously lacked.

Silas's Bong

Silas smokes everyday, multiple times a day. His bong and his weed are necessary to his very existence. He cannot operate without smoking because he feels guilty and at fault for the deaths that occurred at June's home. Towards the end of the novel, his bong breaks. When this occurs, he finally loses his method of escape. No longer can her retreat into the dulling embrace of the weed. Instead, he must confront his emotions and speak with Lydia.



The Canoe

The canoe represents the culmination of Will's connection to the native reserve in Moclips. As a avid political activist, Will found the Native Americans to be a problem close to home. He goes out of his way to learn their customs and works on the reserve. For every hour he works on the reserve, the chief gives him ten minutes of canoe crafting lessons. Will finally completes his canoe just before he goes off to college.

Driver's License

June lost everything when her house exploded. All of her documents burned in the fire and she lost, among much, her driver's license. Despite the lack, she drives to Washington State in her car without legal documentation. She worries about being pulled over and not being able to produce her documents, but still drives. Her disregard for the law is a symbol of her dislocation from life. She cannot fully engage in society any more than she can with her own feelings of despair.

Art

Art is inherently representative, but it becomes more profound in this story because Lolly is an artist and June is an art seller. While June never realizes that her own daughter is talented, the two use art to express themselves and find a point of pleasure that they cannot necessarily find in their own lives. June uses art as an escape and builds a career around it while Lolly employs art as an outlet of emotion.

Bricks of Cocaine

The cocaine found in the back of Luke's car that Rex used to traffic drugs dooms Luke. Before his mother testified against him and before Rex blamed Luke, the teen was a superstar swimmer lining up a full ride at Stanford University. His entire life was in front of him, but then his own mother betrayed him for a man who lied to her. The cocaine becomes the symbol of Luke's supposed wrongdoing and the thing that breaks him.

Moonstone Inn

While the inn is also a setting in the story, it becomes something more than a simple location. For June, it is the place that she finds Lolly. For Kelly and Rebecca, the owners, it is their home and retirement. It is a symbol of their life together and the progress that they have made themselves. Will and Cissy both worked at the Inn and, for them, it was a place of steady and honest labor. For Cissy, it was her livelihood. Consequently, the Moonstone reaches the plane of the symbolic.

Dragon

Silas's dragon terrifies him. When he smokes, he hallucinates a fire-spouting dragon that terrorizes him. He notices that the dragon only began appearing after the explosion of June's house. With this fact in mind, the dragon is a symbol of Silas's guilt. He was there the night of the explosion and meddled with the stove in an attempt to turn off the gas. When the house blew up and four people died, he retreated into the sweet haze of his weed in order to escape his crushing guilt. The dragon pushes him to relate his role in the events of that night to Lydia.



Settings

Litchfield County, Connecticut, USA

After June loses her entire family, she arranges the funeral for the very next day. After the service, June's friend Maxine tells her that she may use Maxine's cottage in Litchfield for as long as she would like. June marvels at the way that a friend like Maxine popped out of the woodwork just when she needed her most. June spends two months in the cottage before she decides to travel across the country and retrace Lolly's steps.

Wells, Connecticut

Wells is the story's central setting. It is a small town where New Yorkers come to vacation for the weekend. These wealthy urbanites flood the town and own much of the prime real estate, but only live in the area for a few weeks of the year. Wells is the home of Lydia, Luke, Silas, and June before the accident. June represents a few who retire to Wells after a successful career abroad while Lydia is the exact opposite. Lydia was born and raised in Wells and had never travelled outside the town until she went to Washington State to find June. The town, as many small towns are, is so tightly knit that privacy is virtually a thing of myth. When the police arrested Luke and when he and June started dating, everyone in the town knew within the day.

Moonstone Inn, Moclips, Washington State

The Moonstone Inn is a haven for June and, later, Lydia. The owners, Rebecca and Kelly, run a quiet and quaint motel overlooking the ocean. Lolly and Will had spent much time there together in the time leading up to their wedding. When the two died, June went to the Inn to try to find some semblance of her daughter. When she finally reaches the Inn, she checks in and simply stays in the room in which her daughter stayed. June spends months at the motel wasting away until Lydia eventually finds her way there and takes care of June. Together, they finally acknowledge that their families are gone.

Glacier National Park, Bowman Lake, Montana

June visits the Glacier National Park while she searches through Lolly's past. She realizes that her daughter had seen and done many things that June herself would never have thought to do. Each revelation involving June's reconnecting with Lolly is all the more tragic because these revelations occur after Lolly's death. At the park, June finds the place that Lolly described as "flawless" in Chapter 8. The idea that the natural can have a visceral effect upon a person reveals itself in this chapter with this awe-inspiring setting.



Moclips, Washington State

Will's lovely family lives in Moclips. In all of the novel, the only family that remotely resembles a functional and happy unit is Will's. Lolly sees this fact and tries to attach herself to the comfort and love of his family. Their house, situated in Moclips, represents the ideal home for which Lolly yearns throughout her entire life. Coming from a home in which her parents divorced each other, Lolly struggled to understand how a family should behave until she visited Moclips and saw how Will and his family interacted.



Themes and Motifs

Drugs

Throughout the novel, Clegg presents the reader with characters who participate in recreational drugs. Silas, one of the story's main characters, smokes weed habitually, Rebecca's closest friend Penny is addicted to heroin, Rex deals and traffics cocaine, and George's son Robert overdoses on heroin. Each of these characters does drugs and their participation in this drug abuse affects not only themselves, but almost every other character in the story. The inclusion of such a high frequency of junkie characters in the story reflects a preoccupation on the author's part and transcends from a simple facet of the story into a serious and prevalent theme.

The theme of drug use and involvement might better be stated as the effect of drug use. Clegg does not describe his characters taking drugs except for when he writes about Silas smoking marijuana. This omission is notable because it draws the reader's attention away from the actual substance. Instead of focusing on the drug itself, its corporeal effect, its consistency, and the mechanics of the act of doing drugs, Clegg moves the focus upon the damaging effect on the user and the user's loved ones.

Of all the above listed characters, only Silas's perspective is ever presented to the reader. In this way, the majority of addicts who enter the novel are seen through the eyes of their family. Rather than featuring every drug-using character, Clegg shifts his story's perspectives to still present drug use, but through the lens of other characters. Consequently, the addicted characters can never give the reader their opinion upon the subject.

In keeping with the minimization of addicts' perspectives, Silas never consciously mentions or critiques his addiction. He recognizes only that weed makes him calmer and puts a sort of veil between his perception and reality. It is a coping mechanism for him to handle his crushing guilt. He smokes to evade. In this way, drugs and drug use become a singular and major theme in the novel.

Loss

Did You Ever Have a Family begins with incredible and destructive loss. When June's stove causes an explosion in her home, four people - Lolly, Will, Luke, and Adam - all perish. The entire novel then focuses on the repercussions of this loss and on its effect on those still living.

The living are the only ones capable of experiencing loss. Subsequently, Clegg never once gives the perspectives of the four who died in the explosion. In his large novel that includes the perspectives of dozens of characters, he never once allows the reader a direct peek into the lives of these four. Instead, the author presents them only through those who survived them.



In accordance with this evasion, June and Lydia are the story's central figures. Each of their defining traits bow to the overarching loss that clouds their perspectives. While the two are different in form and in character, loss defines their relationship to those around them. They cannot operate as others do because they mourn.

With its omnipresent haunting, loss becomes more than a simple feature in the novel. It moves from an inclusion to become a theme that presents itself in the story's protagonists. June acts only out of an urge to find her lost daughter in Lolly's diary. She travels across the entire country to find some semblance of her daughter's ghost. Lydia is June's foil. She stays in Wells and attempts to carry on with her life as if nothing is amiss. In both of these cases, loss is the burden that cripples their interactions with others.

Surviving and Living

Perseverance goes hand in hand with loss. While the explosion nearly destroys the families of those who survive, it also gives these very same characters an opportunity to persevere. As much as they would like to, they do not give in to their loss. Instead, they battle it everyday in an oftentimes silent and unsung manner. Lydia forces herself through a routine each day. She dresses, showers, and buys a coffee at the local diner. She survives.

On the other hand, June travels without any semblance of structure or purpose. She vaguely attempts to retrace Lolly's footsteps, but the result does not provide the happiness or the reassurance that she believes she will find. After she crosses the country, she settles into the Moonstone Inn where she seems content to die. June never analyzes her own position or that of her surroundings. Instead, she simply wades through the muck of her existence in a zombie-like shuffle.

With these two protagonists, Clegg demonstrates the difference between surviving and living. June and Lydia simply survive after their loss because they cannot fully confront their situations. When Lydia finally finds June at the end of the novel, she only says one sentence: "They are gone". With these words, June and Lydia sob. June, frail and wretched after months of wandering through her despair, then falls asleep.

The two women lost their families. With this loss, they also lose themselves in a wave of despair that threatens their sense of identity and purpose. In the resulting pain of their loss, the two resort to a crude manner of survival in which they sustain their bodies, but almost never interact with other humans. June manages to say a mere handful of sentences in the entire span of her trip across the country. Lydia only speaks to a telemarketer who lies to her in order to get her money. At the end of the novel, the two fully come to terms with their situation and begin to try to heal.



Lies and Self-Deception

The overall message of Clegg's postmodern novel is that, in order to live and heal, one must accept the truth of one's circumstances and confront the always complex and oftentimes harsh realities of life. In order to reach this level of self-awareness and acceptance, the author points out that one must first acknowledge one's shortcomings and losses. The way in which he presents Lydia and June's process of grieving forms the basis for the author's assertion that lies and secrets can only hold one back from understanding the truth of their circumstances in a way that will allow one to progress.

Lydia lives for lies and deception. In order to escape her reality, she engages in activities that allow her to behave in a way that defies her actual circumstances. Her largest deception of the novel is her pregnancy with Luke. She has an affair with George while married to Earl then lets Earl believe that the child is his until she finally gives birth. He leaves her and her lie shatters. Then, she later takes up with a man who she knows lies to her. Rex, the drug dealer who ruined her relationship with Luke, gives Lydia lies about his whereabouts and falsifies information about both himself and his work.

Another instance of Lydia's obsession with lies and deception is her relationship with Winton, the telemarketer who religiously calls Lydia everyday. Just fresh off the loss of her son Luke, Lydia falls under the sway of this, yet another, quick-talking and deceiving man who regales her with stories about himself. In response, Lydia even sends money to Winton's company even though she knows it is all a scam.

These lies allow Lydia to feel as if she has a real relationship with someone despite the fact that she does not know anything about Winton until Silas forces her back to reality. Silas, himself crushed under the weight of his culpability in the explosion of June's house, finally firms his resolve and tells Lydia about his role in the accident. He tells her about how he was at the house that night to collect his weed and tried to stop the stove from exploding, but could not turn the machine off. When Silas relates these events to Lydia, she finally comes to terms with the fact that she has lost her son and no amount of lies and self-deception will bring her child back to her. Once she realizes this brutal truth, she can finally begin to heal.

Family

As the novel's title suggests, understanding the theme of family is fundamental to a nuanced reading of Clegg's work. The title of the work presents a stark question to the reader. It asks, using the second person to address the reader specifically, if you, the reader, have ever had a family. Immediately, the reader thinks of their own familial experience. After forcing the reader to conjure their own idea of family, the author presents the tragic death of June and Lydia's entire families. June, especially, loses everyone.



With this juxtaposition, Clegg urges the reader to consider their own familial circumstances then confront this idea of family with that of June and Lydia's realities. As they have lost all of their family members, the author argues that any family is better than none and that these family members may die at anytime so it is best to ensure that one always stays on good terms with one's family. Clegg makes this argument at the very beginning of his story then continues on in order to provide supporting evidence for his claim. He traces the relationships of a massive cast of characters with their families to provide a wide breadth of situations that include a diverse spectrum of circumstances.

While the author certainly demands that the reader consider their fortune of misfortune in terms of family, he does not provide a specific value that can be attributed only to family members. In other words, he does not claim that family is a thing of blood relation. In the case of Rebecca, her childhood friend Penny becomes more than simply a friend. In keeping with his attempt to encompass as broad a spectrum of circumstances as he can, Clegg then presents the reader with June and her childhood friend who drifted apart after June broke her trust. In these ways, Clegg both argues that family is a shifting notion that does not simply speak to one's blood relation, but to the bond between two people.

Although the author does debate the fluidity of family, he also sees the importance of the supportive familial unit. In cases where a characters' parents are estranged or cannot parent their children as a team, that child suffers. Silas's mother is too busy trashing Lydia and gossiping about the women in town to realize that her own son is a drug addict. George and his wife allowed their son Robert to have as much space as he needed, but ended up giving him too much freedom and neglecting him. Robert then overdoses on heroin. On the other hand, Will's family is wildly supportive of him and the five of them are incredibly close with each other. As a result, all three of the children succeed in school and in their extra curricular activities. With these examples in mind, the reader sees both the possible dysfunctionality of a family and the great gift that a supportive family can be.



Styles

Point of View

Did You Ever Have a Family is a complex and shifting novel. It features multiple of points of view from the story's protagonists to minor characters never mentioned before or after their chapter. The story begins with Silas's perspective as he hears the sirens following the explosion of June's house. After hearing this noise, he gets ready for the day. The novel then switches to June's point of view for the second chapter. June, Edith, Lydia, Rick, Rebecca, George, Dale, Kelly, Silas, Lolly, and Cissy each narrate at least one chapter. The novel's major characters like Silas, June, and Lydia narrate multiple chapters.

When writing from Silas's perspective, Clegg uses vulgar language and lowers his level of articulation to that of a teenager. Silas curses regularly and Clegg gives him a whining, disillusioned tone that permeates all of the boy's narration. When the author follows June, he does the opposite. He elevates his eloquence and even dabbles in poetic imagery. Where Silas imagines drug-induced dragons, June sees the world through a haze of grief that keeps her from any real interactions. Consequently, the author attempts to highlight these differences as best he can in the narration that each possesses.

Not only does the author change his tone for each character's point of view, he even changes person. Silas, June, and Lydia's chapters all feature limited, third person point of view. On the other hand, minor characters like George, Cissy, and Rick have chapters in which they speak in the first person. Noting this difference is, in and of itself, important, but the meaning behind this choice requires a far more analytical approach. The reader must question the author's choice in changing not only perspective, but also in person. Clegg pulls the reader away from identifying too much with his main characters in order to set the stage.

His minor characters speak in the first person because Clegg wishes to distance himself from them. When they use the first person, everything they say reflects far more directly upon them rather than on the author himself. By speaking this way, they can offer opinions in a direct fashion that makes it clear to the reader that they are not omniscient and cannot speak with absolute certainty about anything other than their own feelings on a subject. The other side of this coin is that the third person narration that Clegg employs when following his main characters makes every narratorial statement of his fact. Because he is the author and the narration is omniscient, third person, when he writes that June feels like she is walking through a fog, he does so with the authority of the author. Subsequently, the main characters become more complex because the reader can only guess at their mental states using the author's indirect narration.



Language and Meaning

As he does with the point of view of his story, the author changes his language to suit the specific characteristics of members of his cast. For instance, Silas curses in almost every other sentence he speaks while June never once swears. As a teenager, Silas cannot handle the event that leads him to such guilt in the same way as the adult characters. He turns to smoking weed in order to numb his emotions before they can get the better of him. To reflect Silas's urge to escape from his reality, Clegg gives Silas's narration an immature and anxious feel. Not only does he swear, but he also recognizes and obsesses about the female body. The language that Silas uses to appreciate Lydia's body centers around comments remarking that she has such a "killer ass" and "the best rack in the county".

The way in which both characters appreciate beauty contrasts Silas's language and that of June. As a direct point of differentiation, June appreciates the male body with very different words. When she first saw Luke, she remembers that she was struck by his beauty, specifically that of his face, as if she were looking upon a "painting or sculpture". As a scout and buyer of art, she thinks in artistic terms of appreciation. She cannot separate her feelings of awe for Luke and her emotions towards a masterpiece of art. Consequently, she considers him not at as a person, but as an object. His physicality makes him more of a piece to be appreciated rather than a real and complex human whose physicality is only one part of his humanity.

As seen above, June and Silas both appraise members of the opposite sex, but they do so with wildly different terms. Where Silas remarks on Lydia's curves and bust, June marvels at the elegance of Luke's face. Not only do they appreciate different parts of the body, they do so with wildly different language that highlights their differences as characters and also the difference in language that Clegg employs. Another character whose diction differs from the others is Lydia. As Silas, June, and Lydia are the story's main characters, the author pays particular attention to developing their voices. Their individual lexicons shape each of their different tones and personalities in such a way that highlights them as specific characters.

Where Silas uses simple language peppered with vulgar terms, June speaks in elevated and cultured terms. Lydia's narration is equally simple to Silas's, but she does not swear at all. In trying to capture the small-town feel of Wells, Clegg makes sure that the characters who have never left the town and did not pursue higher education speak in a simple manner. Lydia, in all her life, never leaves Wells until she goes to Washington State to find June. Consequently, Clegg narrows her capacity for articulation in order to capture the parochial mindset that he actively cultivates in for the characters from Wells. On the other hand, he elevates the language of characters who come from outside the town and who have attended higher educational institutes like June, George, and Will.



Structure

Did You Ever Have a Family's structure is complex. Clegg changes tense, narrator, setting, and his language from chapter to chapter. Consequently, the structure of the novel is loosely formatted and largely undetectable. The only identifiable sections are the introduction, the rising action, the climax, and the resolution. None of these sections are standardized nor do they fit into neat formations. The introduction gives the perspectives of every major character and follows these characters as they cope with the aftermath of the explosion at June's house that kills four people on the eve of Lolly's wedding.

After Clegg follows Silas, June, and Lydia, he gives the points of view of minor characters in order to flesh out his protagonists. The majority of the novel is a sort of introductory passage in which the author's staggeringly large cast presents itself to the reader. While Clegg does not give the perspective of every character in his novel, he creates numerous storylines that run parallel to each other. The major storylines naturally follow the protagonists. June leaves Wells, lives in a cottage for a while, then travels west until she reaches Moclips and the Moonstone Inn. Lydia stays in town, speaking to Winton and sleepwalking through her life. Silas stalks Lydia, admires her beauty, dowses his sense of guilt with weed, and eventually tells Lydia that the explosion was partly his fault.

In each of these three storylines, the protagonists operate on their own and do not interact with each other at all. June does not speak to Lydia nor Lydia to Silas until the climax of the novel. After many chapters of the author's playing with and teases out the intricacies of his story, he finally begins to give the reader a sense of how each disparate storyline is related. For instance, after three chapters, George finally reaches the part of his story in which he recounts how he met Lydia. Throughout his previous chapters, the reader had no way of tying him into the major storylines of the protagonists. Only once he mentions his interaction with Lydia does the reader finally have an idea of where he fits into the overall story.

After tying in and relating characters to each other as he did with George, the author then pushes the story to its climax. Once he has given the full background on each character, he hints at their relationships to one and other. Once this section of rising action finishes, the story's climax occurs in the later chapters. The climax consists of Silas, Lydia, and June's perspectives. The chapters become far shorter in order to push the action forward in a way that generates suspense. The three main characters remember the events that led to the tragic incident that killed four people at June's house. Silas tells of his role in the explosion, June remembers her fight with Luke, and Lydia gets closer to finding June in the present. With these disparate storylines and temporal settings finally coming together, the climax occurs. The final section of the story is the falling action. This falling action consists of only one chapter in which Cissy explains the cyclical nature of life and how each of the characters will finally be able to begin to heal because they have finally realized that they cannot struggle with their feelings in silence and must confront the tragedy with the help of others.



Quotes

Some people, she decided, magically surface in these horrible moments knowing exactly what to do, which spaces to fill.

-- June (chapter 2 paragraph 18)

Importance: June reflects on the miraculous appearance and kindness of her friend Maxine who offers her cottage to June at the group funeral of her family. This act of selflessness strikes June to her core, not because she has never done anything of the like, but because Maxine's timing and words are the perfect lozenge for June's raw heart. She finds that her friend knew exactly what to say to her and what to do. Rather than giving well-intentioned, but ultimately meaningless words of sympathy, Maxine gives June a refuge and a place to recuperate.

She has occupied space, tolerated each minute until the next one arrived, and then the next.

-- June (chapter 2 paragraph 35)

Importance: Depression and angst play heavily into Clegg's novel. June, reasonably, is destroyed after she loses her family. In response to this loss, she becomes a husk of a person. She simply occupies space as the author puts it here. This quote reveals the profound depth of June's emotions and highlights the importance of family. Without others in her life, she becomes an unconnected shell of a person that cannot operate as others do.

The weekenders from the city not only take the best houses, views, food, and yes, flowers our little town has to offer, but they take the best of us, too.

-- Edith (chapter 3 paragraph 9)

Importance: This sentence is the most real and harsh social critique of the novel. Edith, the flower arranger hired for Lolly's wedding, gives the reader a firm idea of how the Wells townspeople feel about their wealthy neighbors. Edith draws a stringent line between the small town ideals of the regular Wells inhabitants and the carefree attitude of the wealthy New Yorkers who breeze in and out of the town. For the bitter flower arranger, these people who bring money and sustain the town with their affluence are not a positive influence are not saviors, but leeches who take the best that the town has to offer for themselves. In this light, Edith bites the hand that feeds her. Without the money of these hateful, rich urbanites, Edith's flower arrangement business would certainly struggle to stay afloat. She hates the people upon who she depends. Her spite underlines the difference, or supposed difference, in mentality derived from the suburban versus the urban.

A gas leak, an explosion, four people dead, a young couple to be married late that day, the mother of the bride standing on the lawn watching it happen, her ex-husband asleep upstairs and her boyfriend in the kitchen, an ex-con, she makes sure to emphasize, and black, not that it matters.



-- Anonymous gossip (chapter 4 paragraph 32)

Importance: The gossips in the diner in Wells succinctly outline the plight that befalls June and Lydia's families. In the three chapters leading up to this scene, the reader still cannot grasp the situation perfectly. Clegg only ever hints at the tragedy and plays his way through the aftermath rather than giving the reader the event itself. He saves the descriptions of the night of the incident for the climax at the end of the novel. While Lydia sits just in front of these women, she slowly burns with anger. Eventually, she turns around and screams at the gossips for speaking of things with which they are not familiar. This episode and these words reveal the depth of Lydia's pain and the unused fury that resides within her.

Funny, she thinks now, remembering those nights, how things change when you look at them with older eyes.

-- Lydia (chapter 7 paragraph 5)

Importance: Lydia emphasizes a major aspect of the book with these words. She speaks of hindsight. In the entire story, only a handful of chapters even touch upon present events. Instead, the narration focuses on the past as seen through the eyes of certain characters who either lived that past or can speculate upon it. The focus upon hindsight and the looking back with "older eyes" as Lydia puts forth the notion that the past informs the present.

This is a half-life, a split purgatory where her body and mind coexist but occupy separate realities.

-- June (chapter 8 paragraph 1)

Importance: Each time that Clegg visits June, he paints, to use a term specific to June's work, her in a depressing light. Never is she cheery or carefree. She does not laugh, smile, or joke. Instead, June compares her life to a "split purgatory". This interesting combination of words encapsulates her life after the death of Luke, Lolly, Will, Luke, and Adam. If her purgatory is split, the reader must question how it is split. She clarifies her assertion saying that her body and mind exist in separate realities. As a privileged observer, the reader can easily identify June's corporeal reality because it is the one in which she travels across the country then stays at the Moonstone Inn. On the other hand, her mental reality is far more complex. June cannot interact with people in her bodily reality because her mind constantly obsesses about the past. She thinks upon the night in which she lost her family and how she could have replaced the stove or said yes to Luke earlier. Instead of seeing the world around her, she employs hindsight and only stops herself from enjoying the rest of her life.

And then, out of the blue, a couple of kids climbed through Penny's window and raped and strangled her to death.

-- Rebecca (chapter 9 paragraph 43)

Importance: If the reader ever doubted the author's willingness to horrify and disgust, these words leave no room for uncertainty. Clegg includes brutally dark subject matter



throughout the story, but the story never quite becomes bleak and hopeless. Penny was a tortured lesbian who became addicted to heroin then a couple kids raped and killed her. In only looking at plot points, this summary of her life firmly recapitulates Penny's life. In a bleak novel, Clegg would cease speaking about Penny there. Instead, her shifts the narration to focus more upon Penny's effect upon Kelly and how close they were as friends.

They're both journalists, both busy, both black, both sober, and neither wants children.
-- George (chapter 10 paragraph 1)

Importance: George speaks of Robert, his son who went to rehabilitation for a heroin overdose. The overall subject matter of *Did You Ever Have a Family* is expansive and even overstretched. Here, the reader sees an example of the author's urge to diversify his cast of characters in terms of race, sobriety, and preference. Not only does each chapter feature a different character's viewpoint, these characters are also wildly different themselves. From George to Silas and Silas to Rebecca and Rebecca to Cissy, the cast is diverse and as all encompassing as the author can make it.

She was colorful and chatty, full of stories, but had few questions. She drew you in, but once you were there, you sensed she could vanish without warning."
-- Dale (chapter 11 paragraph 52)

Importance: Dale considers Lolly's personality. he is one of the many characters who gives the reader a sense of the recently deceased members of June's family. Here, the reader hears about how Lolly's fiancée's father considered her. Since the reader can never meet the four characters who die in the explosion in the same way that they meet those who survive them, these snippets of description are integral to building a nuanced understanding of the story.

Pru asked if she was okay, and June answered with a question that seemed to Pru more of a comment on June's struggles with Lolly: Did you ever have a family?
-- Dale (chapter 11 paragraph 78)

Importance: Whenever the author writes the title of the story in the book itself, it is a matter of great importance. In all of the novel, this instance is the only time in which the title appears in the text. Consequently, this interaction is important. June finds that she is not sure how to answer her own question. She does not know if her relationship with Adam and then her relationship with their daughter constitutes a cohesive family. Pru, on the other hand, can instantly say that she does indeed have a family and that they are a source of infinite comfort for her.

Our lives felt unreal and far away while we were in that motel room. As if we were telling stories of other people's lives to each other, not our own.
-- George (chapter 16 paragraph 39)

Importance: George and Lydia cannot cope with the hardships in their lives. They break their marriages and have an affair as a way of escaping the crushing



responsibility and debilitating sense of powerlessness that plagues their lives. As the two speak about their lives, they stumble upon wording that hints at the veil between fiction and reality. In many ways, Clegg engages in the postmodern literary tradition. One of the ways in which he does so is through a self-awareness or a metafictional understanding. Here, George and Lydia speak of their lives as if they are fictional. To the reader, this observation is obviously true. The pair are simply characters on a page, but they struggle and live as the reader does. In this manner, Clegg both marks himself as a postmodernist and propels his characters to the realization that their lives are fictional.

They were a funny pair, very different in superficial ways--one sleek and blond, the other earthy, with long, dark hair falling down everywhere; one poised and stoic, the other needier, less sure.

-- Dale (chapter 22 paragraph 14)

Importance: Here, Dale marks June and Lydia as foils. This literary term, foil, is used when two characters contrast each other in such a way that emphasizes the differences between the two. In this case, Dale identifies the two women as foils in both appearance and in personality. By giving the reader not only the physical comparison between the two, but also their differences in temperament, Clegg does much of the reader's analytical work for them. Dale, like many of the other characters, also analyzes and focuses upon the women like every single other member of the cast does. From Silas to Dale, every character finds the two to be noteworthy and attempts to define them.

Because you're not the guy someone like me marries, you're the guy someone like me ends up with after their marriage is over.

-- June (chapter 27 paragraph 21)

Importance: These are June's final words to Luke before he dies in the explosion. June's destructive personality causes her to push away the man who loves and wishes to marry her. Not only does she decline his offer of marriage twice, she destroys any hope he had of actually being with her on equal terms. Her complicated and tragic past with her ex-husband Adam along with her turbulent relationship with her daughter do not give her the skills to properly handle the complex emotions she feels when she is with Luke.