

The Dollmaker Study Guide

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Plot Summary

This novel chronicles the struggles that a spirited woman from the hills of Kentucky faces as she attempts to realize her life-long dream of owning her own farm. Rich in characterization, detail of setting, and symbolic depth, *The Dollmaker* explores themes relating to love, sacrifice, and the dangers of striving too hard to live the American dream.

In the early days of World War II, strong-willed Gertie Nevels saves her youngest son's life by refusing to acknowledge the many obstacles placed in her path. Her gritty determination also fuels her dreams of purchasing a local piece of farmland, which she envisions providing a productive home for her and her family for the rest of their lives. It also sustains her yearning to find the right face for the figure she is carving out of a beautiful block of cherry wood.

Shortly following Gertie's return to her Kentucky mountain home, her husband Clovis is called into the city to undergo his army examinations to see if he is fit to serve. When he does not come back, Gertie has to wait several lonely, anxious waiting weeks before she receives a letter from him. He says he has gotten a job in Detroit and is anxious for her and their five children to join him. Gertie, who had been almost at the point of signing a lease on her beloved farm, is forced to abandon her dreams and move to the city.

A harrowing trip by train and taxi brings Gertie, her children, their few belongings, and the precious block of cherry wood to Detroit in the middle of a vicious winter. She and her children are disappointed to the point of being traumatized - their home, the town, the school, their neighbors, nothing is the way Gertie hoped it would be. Then begins a long and difficult period of struggle as Gertie tussles with gas stoves, electric refrigerators, troublesome neighbors, her children's lack of adjustment, Clovis' unpredictable moods, and her own aching homesickness. Through it all Gertie continually seeks solace in her lingering dreams of returning home and in the block of cherry wood. Sometimes she only caresses it, sometimes she actually works on it, but always she is comforted by it.

As the winter gets worse, so does Gertie's need for comfort. Her eldest son, completely unable to adjust to his new life, runs away and goes back to Kentucky. Her favorite daughter, an imaginative and independent little girl, is run over and killed by a train. Clovis becomes involved in union activities at the plant where he works, eventually being beaten and scarred when he tries to protect his union boss from a beating by thugs who were hired by management. Neighbors come and go, tentative friendships and ongoing rivalries are forged, and through it all, Gertie brings in increasing amounts of money by selling little carvings of animals, small dolls, and figures of Christ on the cross.

At the end of the war, Clovis is laid off and the family's need for money becomes more acute than ever. A former neighbor offers Gertie a substantial and life saving sum of



money to create several small carvings for her. The money is intended to buy wood, but the family's needs are too great for Gertie to ignore. She takes the cherry wood block to a scrap wood dealer and chops it into pieces she can more easily use for the small carvings. All her dreams are gone. All she is left with is her life.



Chapters 1 and 2

Chapters 1 and 2 Summary

This novel chronicles the struggles that a spirited woman from the hills of Kentucky faces as she attempts to realize her life-long dream of owning her own farm. Rich in characterization, detail of setting, and in symbolic depth, *The Dollmaker* explores themes relating to love, sacrifice, and the dangers of striving too hard to live the American Dream.

These two chapters introduce the central character, Gertie Nevels, and the key aspects to her personality and goals that define both the novel's action and its themes.

Chapter 1 - Gertie rides her reluctant mule along a nearly abandoned highway, trying to keep both the mule and the baby boy (Amos) in her arms calm. She guides the mule into the path of an expensive black car, which goes off the road and hangs precariously over a bluff. Gertie dismounts, shoos the mule away, and manages to convince the people in the car, a snobbish military officer and his young, tongue-tied driver, to take her to town so she can get Amos to a doctor. At one point, she realizes Amos is close to dying. She takes out her knife and, as the officer and the driver hold him down, she cuts a breathing hole in his throat the way she saw a veterinarian do to a dying animal. As Gertie skillfully carves a tube to stick in the hole, again repeating what she saw the vet do, the officer overcomes his distaste for her dirty appearance and uneducated manner of speaking to ask her a little more about herself.

Conversation reveals that Gertie's brother was recently killed in the war, that she had a minimum of education based on learning to read the Bible, that she has done a lot of useful carving for family, friends and neighbors but does not do "frivolous" carving. She does admit, however, to the desire to carve a particular piece of cherry wood into the form of a man, as soon as she can find "the right face." She finishes the tube, inserts it into Amos's throat, and he begins to breathe more freely. The officer grudgingly gives her a lift into town, directing the driver to find the doctor's office and make sure he is there. While the driver is gone, Gertie gets out a rumpled, faded five-dollar bill and offers to pay for the trip. At first the officer, as disgusted by the condition of the bill as he is by Gertie herself, refuses to accept the money, but Gertie insists. The officer gives her change as the driver returns with the news that the doctor is in. He escorts Gertie to the office, where she admits that she has never actually been to a doctor before. The officer, after seeing what she did to Amos, cannot believe that she is afraid of anything and urges her to go in.

Chapter 2 - Gertie decisively places herself and Amos at the head of the line to see the doctor, who immediately recognizes Amos' symptoms as those of diphtheria and is surprised to see the emergency surgery Gertie performed. He assures her that she did it exactly right, gives Amos some antibiotics, orders Gertie to stay close and keep the breathing tube free, and promises to check on her later.



As she is watching Amos, Gertie is shocked to discover that the change given to her by the officer was in fact four ten-dollar bills. She puts it deep into a secret pocket just as her husband Clovis arrives, having ridden hastily from their farm after discovering the mule had returned riderless. Gertie assures him Amos is all right, and Clovis expresses admiration for the job the doctor did in cutting the hole in Amos' throat. Gertie does not tell him the truth. They talk at length about the situation at home, referring to the ongoing illness of Gertie's mother and the family's grief over the recent death of Gertie's brother, Henley. Clovis goes out to get Gertie some coffee, and comes back with a couple of hamburgers as well, saying she needs to eat something and reminding her she's never had a hamburger before. She takes just the coffee and goes outside for some fresh air and quiet, looking up at the sky and realizing she has no idea where she is. A while later the doctor passes her on his way back into the clinic, and she asks him what it's like for men who die in the war - whether they're taken to the hospital and cared for. He reassures her, and then tells her he knows both who she is and that she's talking about Henley, whom he once treated.

When Gertie goes back into the clinic, she finds Clovis watching over the now peaceful Amos. She also notices an empty, broken box, and wonders whether anyone would mind if she took some of it to carve, saying she's been meaning to carve a doll for her and Clovis' daughter, Cassie. After talking about how difficult Cassie is being, Clovis says a doll might calm her down. He and Gertie also briefly discuss how they are going to pay for the doctor, with Clovis reminding his wife that once he's in the army in a couple of weeks, she'll be getting money regularly. Clovis then leaves the clinic to start the long journey home. Once he is gone, Gertie barricades the door shut and takes the money out of her secret pocket - not just the money from the officer, but money that she has apparently been saving for years so that she and Clovis can buy their own farm.

Chapters 1 and 2 Analysis

The essential purpose of these two chapters is to lay important groundwork for almost every aspect of the story to follow. There are references to Gertie's courage and determination, frequent references to money and the cost of things, equally frequent references to her carving, and the cherry wood block. References especially to Gertie's knife as a symbol of life are the most important of these. Other, less important, but nonetheless significant aspects to both this first section and to the novel are the references to how "difficult" Cassie is being and to Gertie's not knowing where she (Gertie) is. All these elements vividly foreshadow later developments in the novel. To take them in order, Gertie's determination here remains a constant, central, defining element of her character. Specifically, her determination to save Amos' life is just a facet of her overarching drive to provide a good home and life for her family. The important thing to note is the way in which what *defines* a good home and life undergoes a significant process of transformation throughout the novel.

Money and the physical cost of everything from land to cars to the dolls Gertie makes and sells are one of the core motivators for many of the characters, and therefore of the action as a whole. The novel is also concerned with what life costs *spiritually*, an



essential aspect of Gertie's story relating to one of the novel's key themes, the cost of living the American Dream of success. The cherry wood block is of equal thematic importance, in that it embodies and symbolizes Gertie's version of that dream (a self sufficient farm of her own). On the other hand, in its eventual destruction at the end of the book, the cherry wood block also symbolizes the destruction of Gertie's original dream as it is transformed into the citified, possession and money oriented dream of post World War II America. The role Gertie's knife plays in saving Amos' physical life foreshadows the role it plays in saving her own spiritual life through carving, and also foreshadows the negative, powerfully ironic use to which the knife is apparently put in Chapter 37 - the killing of a young man by Clovis.

The reference to Cassie being difficult foreshadows later revelations of her emotional and mental state, her difficulties adjusting, and her eventual death. Finally, the reference to Gertie feeling lost foreshadows her journey throughout the course of the novel as she becomes increasingly lost in the life of the city, and her dreams of her farm become lost in the demands of city life.

The "surgery" Gertie performs on Amos is a crude version of an actual medical procedure called a tracheotomy. Her lie to Clovis about the doctor having performed the procedure foreshadows her repeatedly self-effacing denials of her skills and value throughout the book.



Chapters 3 and 4

Chapters 3 and 4 Summary

These chapters introduce Gertie's family and core relationships.

Chapter 3 - Gertie reads to her children from the Bible, in an attempt to help them move on from their grief over Henley. Clytie weeps as she studies a gift Henley gave her, while Reuben reacts to Gertie's reading with sullen anger. Enoch is restless with his lack of understanding of anything other than the fact that Henley is gone, while Amos is too young to understand even that. In the middle of the reading and the grieving Cassie laughs and plays, paying no attention to her mother as she sits on the block of cherry wood Gertie referred to earlier.

As the reading finishes, Clovis impatiently tells Gertie and the children to get ready to go visiting: he and the children to his parents and Gertie to her mother's. Clytie complains about having to ride with the constantly restless Cassie, and Gertie agrees to take Cassie. Reuben asks whether he can go hunting instead, since he saw his grandparents only a few days before. Clovis reminds him of the family rule about no hunting on Sunday, but Gertie recalls how Henley used to hunt on Sundays, which changes Clovis' mind.

As Gertie, Cassie, and Reuben walk to Gertie's mother's, Reuben goes on ahead and hunts. Meanwhile, Gertie and Cassie walk together, Cassie chattering away, wandering off the path, and engaging in imaginary conversations with her invisible friend, the witch child Callie Lou. Gertie manages to lead her past the Tipton Place, the land she dreams of buying with her accumulated savings. After joking with Cassie about how three stray sheep on the front porch of the farmhouse look like the Tipton family, she gives in to Cassie's pleas and quickly carves a small doll for her. Just as she is finishing it, she hears an excited shout from Reuben. Not too concerned because she knows how skilful a hunter and woodsman he is, Gertie nevertheless hurries to find him. He excitedly tells her that he shot at a bear. Gertie reminds him that it's illegal to hunt bears but he remains excited, anticipating what Henley will say when . . . and then he remembers that Henley is dead, and falls silent.

Gertie, Reuben, and Cassie resume their journey to Gertie's mother's, again passing the Tipton Place. Gertie hints that she has hopes of buying it. Reuben says that Clovis won't like living on a farm, but Gertie assures him Clovis will be perfectly happy. Reuben again runs on ahead, and Gertie watches as he cuts "a little crooked cedar away from a straight one so that the straight one could grow."

Chapter 4 - When Gertie arrives at her parents' home, Cassie right away runs to her grandfather's workshop. Gertie almost manages to avoid her Mother, but is not quite fast enough - Mother manipulates her into coming into the house, sitting with her in the overcrowded sitting room filled with knickknacks and dying plants, and talking. Gertie,



as she has ever since she was a girl, sits silently and becomes increasingly uncomfortable as Mother speaks at tearful, melodramatic length about her intense faith in the Bible, her disappointment in Gertie, and her ill health. Mother also frets about Henley, whom she says wasn't a proper Christian and is therefore going to hell. She uses this as another weapon to attack Gertie, referring to the dancing incident and saying that because Henley always looked up to her, she led him astray and into heathenism.

Gertie escapes and makes her way to her father's workshop. She discovers him carving, just like she does, and sadly recalls Henley. Clearly more alike and mutually affectionate than Gertie and Mother, they make small talk about his health and her hopes for buying the Tipton Place. Their conversation is interrupted by Mother, who has seen the preacher coming, and wants Gertie to help her prepare a meal. Cassie stands in the door and watches as Mother says this is the last chance she'll have to see Gertie on her own, reluctantly expresses her gratitude for all the work Gertie did around the farm when she was a girl, and tells her Henley wanted her to have all the money he'd saved to start his own farm. She gives Gertie a few bills, and then when Father reminds her that Henley wanted Gertie to have all of it, hands over the rest. When Gertie starts to cry from sheer joy, Cassie becomes frightened and runs to her. Gertie, embarrassed, runs out of the workshop, Cassie hanging on around her neck.

Gertie calms down after a while, reassuring Cassie that everything is all right, realizing that she might have lost some of the money in her blind, emotional run from the workshop, and also realizes that she does not even know how much money there was. She stops and, while Cassie runs and plays, counts the money and discovers there is three hundred dollars there. She then realizes she has enough to buy the Tipton Place right away - she does not have to wait for Clovis to go into the army and collect his regular salary. Cassie runs back, she and Gertie play together briefly, and then Cassie asks whether Gertie was crying because Mother said Henley was going to hell. Gertie tells her that there isn't really a hell and that Jesus isn't as mean as Mother and her interpretation of the Bible says he is. She talks playfully, but with faith, about Jesus being on earth with everyone all the time, how he dresses like a carpenter, and how he enjoys being with people, laughing and talking with them, in the way Henley did.

Chapters 3 and 4 Analysis

The key characteristics of Gertie's children, parents, and husband are vividly and very individualistically defined in these two chapters. The sullenness of Reuben, the playfulness and imagination of Cassie, and the emotional manipulations of Mother all play key, defining roles later in the action. Clytie's concern with appearances and Enoch's slick laziness are less important to the plot overall, but are nonetheless consistently portrayed throughout the novel and provide secondary motivations for Gertie's actions.

The Tipton Place, like the previously discussed block of cherry wood, is a key symbol of Gertie's determination to provide a good, healthy, simple life for her family. The fact that



Henley's money enables her to come much closer to realizing that dream suggests that the relationship between the two of them (Gertie and Henley) was one of kindred spirits. This is much truer here than in the relationship between Gertie and Clovis, which right from the beginning seems to be a relationship of opposites; not so much in terms of the core of their dreams but rather in the way they go about realizing their dreams. They both want a better life for their family but as the action of the novel reveals, their definitions of "better" are completely opposite. All that is to come - for now, the sense of opposition between the two of them is dramatized by their relatively minor confrontation over hunting and which grandparent Reuben is to visit.

This novel is full of what might be described as "glimpsed" symbols; moments of poetic imagery that for a moment or in a phrase serve to illuminate a character, an action, or a motivation but are not developed further. The reference to the little crooked cedar being cut away is one such "glimpsed" symbols, and refers to the way Gertie's dream of the Tipton Place is cut away to allow for the bigger, overwhelmingly stronger dream of successful, prosperous city life to flourish. It might also be seen as a symbol of the way Cassie, who is in some ways spiritually and physically weaker than her siblings, and Reuben, who is temperamentally unsuited to life in the city, are both "cut away" from the family, allowing its remaining members to live more fully the life they have chosen.



Chapter 5

Chapter 5 Summary

On the morning that Clovis is to go into town for his examinations to see whether he is fit to go into the army, Gertie wakes before sunrise, having just had a dream about Henley. She gets up and spends a few rare and precious moments looking up at the stars, enjoying solitude and quiet, contemplating her future, and imagining her life on the Tipton Place. After building a fire and putting on a pot of coffee she rouses Clovis, who tries to embrace and kiss her but is roughly rebuffed - Gertie, it seems, is uncomfortable with demonstrations of affection from her husband. As Clovis washes and shaves and Gertie makes him breakfast, their conversation reveals that they have very different desires for their futures. Clovis, simultaneously wanting to give Gertie a better life and jealous of Gertie's sister Meg and her apparent prosperity in town, wants to go to work in a factory or a machine shop. Gertie, however, is determined to live the life she has always lived, working on a farm. Their differences are symbolized by a recollected argument over whether Gertie should continue to use her old cedar water bucket or get a newer tin one.

Soon Clovis is ready to leave. He tells Gertie he wants to wake the children to kiss them goodbye, but Gertie reminds him he is not leaving to go to war, but just to go to his examination. Clovis suddenly recalls that he left his wallet up in their bedroom, and tells Gertie to go out and get the truck ready while he goes up to get it. Gertie goes out and prepares the truck. Clovis joins her and attempts to kiss her goodbye, but his lips miss hers when she turns to check whether the truck is still running. Clovis drives off and Gertie watches him go. The sun is just rising.

The children awake, fretting that Clovis left without saying goodbye. Gertie tells them a little white lie - that Clovis kissed them all before he left. They all get on with their day, doing chores around the farm, eating meals, and doing their lessons, all the while suppressing their worry about Clovis. All day, the free spirited and inattentive Cassie gets on the nerves of the fastidious and prissy Clytie, particularly when they are doing their lessons. Cassie has difficulty reading, and even though Gertie takes special time and care with her, Clytie and the other children mock her. Gertie loses her temper, threatening to whip them with Clovis' shaving strop. Cassie tells her she can't because it's gone. This leads her and the other children to imagine that he's gone for good - he wouldn't have taken the strop with him if he'd meant to come back. Gertie assures them he'll be back, even as she is rushing upstairs and finding that the strop is indeed gone. Fear makes Reuben and Enoch quarrelsome, and Clytie tries to calm them by saying that Clovis will be back and suggesting that he may have gone to work in a factory. Gertie surprises everyone, including herself, with the forcefulness of her claim that "He'd be better off in th' war than in one a them factories!"



Chapter 5 Analysis

It becomes clear in this chapter that there is a dark side to Gertie's dreams of an independent life. She is so focused on doing things her way, feeling her feelings her own way, and living her life her way. The problem, defined clearly in this chapter, is that her life is so anchored in both habit and fantasy that what is going on around her is either dismissed or rejected. This aspect to her character and situation is dramatized in her rejection of Clovis' kiss, which functions on two levels. The first is as a rejection of any display of open feeling, an aspect of her character that appears notably in Gertie's passive relations with her mother and later in her lack of open grieving at the death of Cassie. The second level of function of Gertie's rejection is that in turning away Clovis' kiss she is also turning away or dismissing Clovis' dreams and goals, expressed within the context of his evident affection for his wife and his equally evident desire to give her and their children a better life, both desires which seem to be realistic and loving.



Chapters 6, 7, 8 and 9

Chapters 6, 7, 8 and 9 Summary

These four chapters develop and bring to a climax the novel's first core conflict, that of Gertie's and Clovis' visions of a better future for their family.

Chapter 6 - As Gertie and Cassie go to the post office and grocery store in town to see if there is any mail, narration reveals that it has been a week since Clovis' departure and that Gertie has had no word from him. When she arrives at the store, the storekeeper tells them the mail is going to be late. Gertie and Cassie chat with Clovis' mother, who reassures Gertie that Clovis is all right and then returns home to take care of her husband, taking Cassie with her.

As other women of the township gather to wait for the mail, Gertie becomes restless and sets to digging the shopkeeper's potatoes. As she digs, Old John, described in narration as the wealthiest landowner in the area, arrives, coming out to the potato patch to talk to her. Hope flares in Gertie as she wonders whether he has come to make a deal with her for the Tipton Place. Old John compliments her on her farming skills and tells her he saw her father who had revealed that he had given Gertie Henley's money so that she could buy the Tipton Place and live close enough by that they could visit. Hope flares even higher in Gertie as Old John reveals that he has decided to sell the place to her for what he paid for it.

As he is talking about how many payments she will have to make, she happily tells him that, thanks to Henley's money, she can pay for it in one lump sum. Before the conversation can go any further, Gertie realizes that conversation between the other women has stopped and they are all listening to the sound of an approaching car - a car that sounds nothing like the usual vehicles that make their way to the store. Narration reveals that similar sounding cars have only brought bad news from the war - news of family members like Henley being killed, or Clovis' brother Jesse going missing. As she and Old John join the others, Gertie sees that Clovis' mother and Cassie have returned. Everyone becomes very still and they wait, fearful, and preparing themselves to grieve.

As the car drives up, one of the other women notices it is the same car brought the news about Henley and Jesse. Everyone waits as the car stops and a well-dressed woman in a fur coat steps out, opens a pocketbook, and takes out a letter of the same sort and color as the letter that contained the bad news about Henley. The woman asks for Clovis' father. Clovis' mother tells her he hasn't come, and that she can take him whatever news there is. As the other women quietly but noticeably express their relief that the news is not for them, the woman in the fur coat reveals that the news is actually good - her missing son Jesse has been found. He is a prisoner of war in Italy.

Chapter 7 - As the other women are looking at a map to try to see where their loved ones are, Gertie hears the mailman. She rushes out to the front of the store, followed by



the other women who again become still and watchful as the mailman arrives, unloads his sacks, and hands them to the shopkeeper who takes them inside, followed by the women, all eager for news. After the letters are sorted, Gertie is given a registered letter from Clovis. She opens it, discovers sixty dollars, and becomes so engrossed in her imaginings of what the money can help her accomplish that she is embarrassed when Clovis' mother asks her to read the letter that came with it.

As Gertie reads the letter aloud, she and everyone else learns how Clovis passed his army examinations but has not been called to service yet, how he sold his truck for more money than he paid for it, and how he got a well-paying job in Detroit. He promises to send money regularly because he wants Gertie and the children to not have such a difficult life, and concludes with expressions of affection for both Gertie and the children. Gertie does not read that part. Clovis' mother and the other women worry that Gertie will follow her husband to the city, but Gertie reassures them that she is not going anywhere. Later, she reflects on how Clovis has wanted to be in Detroit working since the war began, and cannot blame him for staying when there is no work locally for him. She tells herself that as soon as the war is over he will be back. As she starts for home, she becomes aware of a fierce, explosive joy that quickly transforms into plans for carving the cherry wood, happy plans that replace the mournful Judas face she had often thought of carving with the face of a happy Christ.

Chapter 8 - This chapter begins in a rainstorm with Gertie and her children settling into their new house - or in what will be their new house as soon as Old John, to whom Gertie has already given a large down payment, goes into town and signs a deed of transfer. As she carves an ax handle, she listens to Clytie make plans for buying curtains and dishes, encourages Reuben through his difficulties with whittling, and listens with amused tolerance as Cassie and Amos play noisily in the next room. She also looks around at the well-designed windows, strong walls and ceiling and non-smoky fireplace, thinking how good it is to be in a house where the rain does not come in, and how glad Clovis will be when he sees their new home.

After a while, she goes upstairs to find out why Enoch has been so quiet for so long, marveling as she goes at the fact that she actually *has* an upstairs. She discovers that Enoch, whom she had told to inspect the roof for leaks, has been reading his way through a collection of schoolbooks and storybooks. She sets him and the other children to reading and studying, telling Cassie (who has trouble learning her letters and words) to instead commit a poem to memory by hearing it. She then goes outside to cut wood for ax handles, searching through several trees and leaving many to grow even stronger so they can provide wood for the barn she plans to build.

Chapter 9 - Early one morning, Gertie churns butter as she listens to the lonely baying of hunting dogs in the distance and recalls how short a time has passed both since Henley left (five months) and since word came of his death (less than a month). She shifts her thoughts from her dead brother to her living dreams and plans for the Tipton Place. Later in the morning puts some of those plans into action, moving a few trees around. Her contentment is interrupted by the arrival of Mother, weeping and moaning about how by buying the Tipton place Gertie has betrayed Clovis, who wants his family



to move to Detroit with him. As she goes on in her manipulative way, Reuben watches Gertie with the intense but increasingly vain hope that she will stand up for herself and defend their plans for the farm. Mother makes life in Detroit sound so wonderful that Clytie, Cassie, Enoch, and Amos all become excited. Only Reuben, who seems to have wanted to live life on the farm as much as Gertie, seems to be upset.

While Gertie is reassuring Cassie that the family dog will be able to come to Detroit too, she realizes that Old John is coming up the lane, and suspects that he would not be coming so early in the morning if he had signed the deed. Her suspicions prove correct as Old John tells her that Mother visited him the night before, and that she convinced him that buying the farm is not what Clovis would want. Old John says he promised to sell Gertie the farm out of consideration for her father, but says that Mother is right - that the children belong where they can get good schooling and Gertie belongs with her husband.

Chapters 6, 7, 8 and 9 Analysis

One of the key structural components of this novel is the way its overall plot contains a series of mini-plots, each with its own narrative line and climax. These chapters contain the first of these mini-plots, with Gertie's plans for owning the Tipton Place nearing realization and then being destroyed. This mini-plot is the first of several developmental stages in the *overall* plot, which can be summed up as the transformation of Gertie's dreams. In this section the old dream is physically, but not spiritually, taken from her. Her spiritual loss is developed throughout the rest of the book.

Within this four-chapter mini-plot, there are two intriguing, and quite self-contained, elements. The first is an extremely effective sense of suspense in Chapters 6 and 7. In its carefully understated way, the writing here both vividly evokes the sense of suspense in the women waiting for the mail and awakens an echoing sense of anticipation in the reader. Similar suspense is generated in later mini-plots, notably the "death of Cassie" mini-plot and the "Clovis kills" mini-plot. Another self-contained element here is the sense of the loneliness of Gertie and the other women, of their living in a world without men taken away by the war. Again, the writing in this context is subtly powerful, clearly evoking the empty ache of being husband-less and son-less as well as the fear that that loneliness, if the wrong letter arrives, will become a lifelong condition.

Less self-contained elements include the consistent characterizations of Gertie's family - Clytie is still, and always will be, possession conscious, Reuben is rebellious, Cassie is inattentive and imaginative, and Enoch is lazy and crafty. Meanwhile, Mother's self-pitying and soul-destroying manipulations reach their peak in this scene as she uses guilt to get Gertie to do what she (Mother) thinks is right as opposed to what Gertie believes is right and what the action of the novel eventually proves to have *been* right. The key noteworthy element in their confrontation is the reference to Gertie's being unable or unwilling to stand up to Mother. Her action, or lack thereof, both haunts her throughout the novel and finds echoes in circumstances that may or may not be the



result of similar inaction, Cassie's death being the most obvious and vividly dramatized example.

Finally, this mini-plot develops and defines two important, symbolic elements of both Gertie's character and the story as a whole. The knife, used here by Gertie in a productive way as opposed to what she calls a "foolish" way (i.e., to create playthings, or things of beauty), becomes at this point a symbol of the security Gertie feels about her dream of owning a farm of her own. Gertie's carving has a similar symbolic value, representing here her sense of comfort, safety, accomplishment, and pride. Both the knife and Gertie's carving, particularly when used in relation to the cherry wood block, continue to function on these symbolic levels throughout the novel - that is, until the knife is used to commit murder, both Clovis' literal murder of the man who assaulted him and Gertie's metaphorical murder of her dreams of life back home.

In terms of action, the narrative progression of this mini-plot is fairly textbook in its use of basic elements. It moves from a place of uncertainty (Gertie wondering where Clovis is and when she will be able to buy the Tipton Place) through a change of fortune (Old John's preliminary agreement to sell the place) towards a climactic reversal of fortune (Mother's manipulating Gertie into going into the city). This pattern is repeated in the novel's subsequent mini-plots, with each mini climax heightening narrative and thematic tension until the book's final and all encompassing climax - Gertie's destruction of the cherry wood block at the end of Chapter 37.



Chapters 10, 11 and 12

Chapters 10, 11 and 12 Summary

These three chapters follow Gertie and the children as they move to Detroit and begin to settle into their unfamiliar, intimidating surroundings.

Chapter 10 - Gertie wakes from an intense dream about being late for milking, slowly realizing that she is on a train. Aware of intense cold from the window on one side of her and intense heat from the packed carriage on the other, she is also painfully aware of Amos and Cassie heavy in her lap, Enoch and Clytie beside her, and Reuben across from her, all asleep and all wearing new clothes bought with Henley's money. Overwhelmed by the unfamiliar sights, sounds, and smells of the train, Gertie makes her way into the lavatory where she vomits. Afterwards she sits quietly and reflects on Clovis' insistence that she and the family join him in Detroit, and on how things would be different if she'd had the courage to stand up to him, her mother, Old John and God - she'd be in her long dreamed of home in the Tipton Place.

Gertie becomes aware of a black woman sitting in outside the lavatory watching her. They make tentative small talk, in which the black woman tells Gertie that she's moving to Detroit to be with her man in an apartment on a street called Paradise. As they talk, Gertie absent-mindedly toys with the knife in her pocket, searches through the garbage for something to carve, and eventually settles down to carve a discarded piece of hickory. She occasionally goes back to check on the children, but is always reassured to see that they are sleeping as peacefully as she left them. After she is finished, she offers the basket as a gift to the black woman and her daughter. The black woman is surprised and pleased, telling Gertie that people in the city often pay money for hand carving like hers.

Chapter 11 - After arriving at a train station in Detroit, Gertie struggles with her exhausted, excited children through crowds of pushy, hurried people, some calling her "hillbilly." She takes a moment to sit out of the freezing wind and snow, reluctantly allows the children to fetch themselves something to eat and her some coffee, and then after they come back sends them to collect their possessions, still hoping that Clovis will be there to meet her. When Clytie reminds her that Clovis had said to take a cab, she leads the children to a cab stand where they wait in line for a long time, and Gertie gives a terrified and freezing young woman a blanket. They finally get into a cab, and Enoch chatters excitedly with the cab driver about the traffic, airplanes, and the police, referring all the time to the pictures he saw in the reader left behind in the Tipton Place and completely unaware, although Gertie is not, that the much more worldly cab driver is mocking him. After a long, noisy and shaky ride the cab pulls up in front of the family's new home, one of a shabbily cared for row of houses near a factory - 18911 Merry Hill.

Chapter 12 - Gertie struggles to become accustomed to her new home. She finds the rooms too small, aware that two or three of them could fit into one room of the Tipton



Place. Her struggles to work the unfamiliar gas stove result in fear, singed hair, and deepening frustration. Amos and Enoch are soaked by the shower, Clytie is disappointed in the lack of pretty decoration, Cassie is terrified by the banging on the walls from angry neighbors complaining about the noise, and Reuben is angered by the unfriendly lack of welcome he gets when he goes out to find kindling for the coal fire.

Over the course of what seems to Gertie like a long and frightening day, there are several encounters with neighbors. The first is a young woman (Max) with imaginative, other-worldly eyes like Cassie's who speaks distractedly of needing something to dream of and seems immediately relieved when Gertie tells her she dreams of "Paradise." Another is a smiling young woman named Maggie who wears an intriguing pendant on a chain around her neck and brings newspapers and some dry wood for the fire. Gertie takes the wood and recognizes it as pieces of a toy. Maggie tells her it came from a broken doll bed she'd always meant to repair but never got around to. When Gertie tries to give it back, Maggie tells her she's too old for dolls. Gertie comments that she doesn't seem old at all, and notices that when she (Gertie) breaks up the wood to put in the fire, Maggie seems suddenly sad. One other neighbor appears - a blowsy older woman named Sophronie Meanwell, who has dyed hair and painted toenails and is dressed in a flimsy nightgown. Clytie seems to find her pretty, but Gertie thinks she is sleazy. She brings some food and says anytime Gertie needs to borrow anything she can come right over.

With Enoch's help, Gertie finally gets the stove and oven working, and is in the midst of preparing dinner as best she can when Clovis returns home. As the children rush happily into his arms, Gertie wonders whether her mother and the others were actually right, and the children really do belong with their father. Clovis tells Gertie he's been looking forward to a good meal, the first since he's been in Detroit, but soon becomes unhappy when he tastes the mess that Gertie, working in a frighteningly unfamiliar kitchen, makes of Sophronie's gifts and some eggs. As the family is eating, Clovis reveals to Gertie that he got the good job he did by telling lies about his experience, but that he's managed to keep it because he's so skilled. He also tells her that he's bought most of the contents of the apartment on credit, angrily telling her when she asks how much debt they have that she sounds ungrateful. Finally, he tells her that he's got a car, and the children (all but Reuben) get excited about the prospect of driving in it.

As night falls, the children go to sleep. Gertie and Clovis soon go to bed themselves, with Gertie uncomfortably aware of how thin the walls are. She lies restlessly awake, listening to the comings and goings of all the neighbors and wondering at Sophronie, who comes in after midnight. Clovis, half-asleep, asks her what other time a woman who works the three-to-twelve shift should come in.

Chapters 10, 11 and 12 Analysis

The challenges Gertie faces in this section form the basis of the essential challenges she faces throughout the rest of the book - conducting relationships with troubled neighbors, managing new and unfamiliar technology, raising her easily distracted



children, and loving her increasingly work-obsessed husband. Difficulties within each of these aspects of her new life emerge and take on newer and more threatening forms as Gertie becomes more and more entrenched in a competitive, striving, image-oriented life that could not be more different from her life back home.

This section is where the process of transformation imposed upon Gertie's dreams begins. Hope for life on a farm recedes further and further away as the necessities of achieving the good life dreamed of by her husband take more and more of her energy, time, and spirit. In this section, Gertie and her family begin to live the American Dream, a process that seems to be defined by the acquisition of visible evidence of wealth and success. The car is the first example of this, with the later purchases of the washing machine and the refrigerator providing additional, more costly examples. From this moment on Gertie's prime motivation, the acquisition and management of money, transforms from a means for her to achieve her dream into a means of not just survival but of creating the illusion of prosperity.

There is one significant piece of foreshadowing in this section. The comments of the black woman on the train, telling Gertie she can make money carving, foreshadows the way Gertie's carving becomes a secondary, and eventually the primary, source of income for her family.



Chapters 13, 14 and 15

Chapters 13, 14 and 15 Summary

These chapters tell of the many adjustments Gertie and her family have to make in their new life in the city, and introduce the element of religious conflict into the story.

Chapter 13 - Gertie struggles to get her children into their new, unfamiliar snowsuits for their walk to school for their first day. As she waits for them to finish, she sees the excited Enoch, who has hurried to get ready so he can get to school faster, get bullied by some of the neighbor children. She says nothing when he comes back in the house, knowing he is happier if he thinks he can take care of himself, and then gathers all the birth and vaccination certificates she needs, deciding to place them in one of her hand carved baskets in spite of Clytie telling her, with some embarrassment, that nobody carries baskets in the city.

As Gertie goes out with the children, carrying Amos who is too little for school or to leave alone, Sophronie offers to stay with him for a while. Gertie reluctantly leaves him, walking the other children to school and telling the nervous Cassie about all the wonderful things she will find there. A dark haired boy, whom Gertie thinks looks sullen and moody, gives Cassie two pieces of chewing gum and Cassie cheers up, running a little ahead. The boy then tells Gertie that she shouldn't have told Cassie any lies, telling how he had to tell his own little brother lies and paid for it later. As she walks through stopped traffic and across train tracks, Gertie wonders what lies he was talking about. Seeing how poor and underdressed so many of the other children are, she also wonders whether she should have thanked Clovis for buying all the winter clothes instead of becoming angry with him about all the money he spent.

When she finally gets to the school, Gertie understands what the boy meant - the school is not nearly as large, beautiful and well equipped as she told Cassie. Her apprehension steadily increasing, Gertie leaves Cassie with the tired but friendly kindergarten teacher, Miss Vashinsky, and then registers the other children. As she is leaving, one of the teachers comes up to her and compliments her on the beauty of her basket, expressing surprise when she tells him she carved it herself. One of the students asks to borrow it to sketch, and Gertie gives it to her. As she goes away, the teacher reassures Gertie that her children will be fine - that they will "adjust." As she makes her way home, she wonders whether she wants them to "adjust," and whether she herself will ever adjust.

Chapter 14 - Narration tells how Gertie gets into the habit of taking a few moments of early morning quiet after Clovis leaves for work and before the children have to be sent to school. She fills those moments with carving, using some of the discarded maple firewood to carve what eventually reveals itself as a hen. Time is always too short and her concentration is never complete, aware as she is of the ticking of the clock - all too soon, it is time to get the children off to school.



One particular morning, after struggling yet again with the increasingly fearful Cassie and her other children, Gertie goes out to get some vegetables from the truck of an Italian grocer. Gertie listens quietly as neighbors, like the nosy, finicky Mrs. Anderson and the outspoken Sophronie, gossip and ask pointed questions of the grocer (Joe) and his new assistant, who does not speak English but whose eyes speak the language of lust as he stares at the beautiful Max, the young woman who asked Gertie for a dream (Chapter 12). As he does, Gertie recalls how she heard Max, through their thin adjoining walls, making love with her husband and then weeping. Gertie recalls speaking words of comfort through the walls, comfort that Max did not seem that comfortable accepting. Finally, the other shoppers are gone and Gertie is left alone with Joe. She chooses her vegetables, and then tentatively asks him how long it took him to like his new life. He takes a while to respond, but then finally says he didn't come to the city to like it.

Chapter 15 - On the way home from the grocery store with Amos, Gertie witnesses a confrontation between a door-to-door Christian preacher (the gentle Mrs. Bales) and the aggressive, angry, very Roman Catholic Mrs. Daly. Other neighbors, including Mrs. Anderson, Max, and Sophronie come out of their houses and watch as Mrs. Daly flings the soapy water she had been using to scrub her steps in Mrs. Bales' face. As Mrs. Anderson and Max help the soap-blinded woman into Max's home, Mrs. Daly seems about to strike her with her broom, but Gertie steps forward and blocks her. They face off for a few tense moments, and then Max calls to Gertie to come in as well - a last shipment of things from home has arrived.

When Gertie goes into the house, she sees that the block of cherry wood is among the boxes, and immediately examines it to make sure it has not been damaged. When she sees it is all right, she joins the conversation around the kitchen table - Mrs. Bales, waiting for her clothes to dry, has gotten into an intense, almost argumentative discussion with Max about religion. Conversation reveals that Max is extremely unhappy with her husband Victor, whom she says is more devoted to his mother and his faith than he is to her, blaming him for the death of their baby girl because, as she claims, he and his mother wanted a boy. She speaks about how it gets harder and harder to love a man when they insist upon change for his sake, not hers. Gertie surprises herself by agreeing.

Amos and Mrs. Anderson's children come in playing with Max's husband's rosary and religious icons. Gertie gets a look at the rosary, and is interested to see that the face of the Christ is one that Mother would identify with - filled with suffering and drizzled with blood. Meanwhile, a well-dressed black woman appears, looking for Mrs. Bales, who quickly puts on her still damp clothes and prepares to leave. On her way out she notices the block of cherry wood and studies it for a long time, asking Gertie whether she's right in seeing Christ in the carving. Gertie tentatively admits that that's what she's hoping to carve, but adds that she can't find a face. Mrs. Bales assures her she'll find it, and then leaves with the black woman.



Chapters 13, 14 and 15 Analysis

These chapters introduce more of Gertie's neighbors, many of which play important roles in the action later on. These include Mrs. Anderson, whose story is in many ways a parallel to Gertie's, and Mrs. Daly, who veers unpredictably back and forth between anger and generosity. A particularly interesting character who appears only in this section, but who is spoken about later, is Mrs. Bales, who actually turns out to be the wife of a wealthy industrialist. Her double life is symbolic of the way so many of the women in this housing complex, particularly Gertie but also Mrs. Anderson and Mrs. Daly, are forced to keep important aspects of themselves hidden and secret in order to support their husband's goals and ambitions. Meanwhile, the conflict here between Gertie and Mrs. Daly foreshadows ongoing conflict between the Nevels family and the Daly family, conflict that climaxes in Chapter 38 when Mr. Daly, after smugly informing Gertie and Clovis that the police are looking for them, is surprised by the true nature of the relationship between the Nevels and the police.

The Roman Catholic faith, as practiced and preached by Mrs. Daly and her family, plays a secondary but important role in defining the context of Gertie's story. There is the sense throughout the book that business, government, and society are all run by members of the Catholic Church who, throughout the book in general, seem to have very little tolerance for lifestyles, faiths and belief systems other than their own. For Clovis and the other workers, the Catholic Church is almost as much of an antagonist as is the wealthy industrialist that owns the factories in which they work, exploiting them and manipulating them in order to increase his profits. This sense of antagonism is further illustrated by the relationship between the non-Catholic Max and the very Catholic Victor, whose mother appears to be the same kind of religiously manipulative woman as Gertie's mother.

There are a couple of important elements of foreshadowing in this section. These include the introduction of Joe the vegetable seller and of his habit of hiring his "nephews" (really recent immigrants from Italy with no real relationship to him) as assistants. One of these nephews attacks Clovis in Chapter 35, and in revenge is killed by Clovis in Chapter 37. Another important foreshadowing can be found in the reappearance of the block of cherry wood and in Gertie's references to being unable to find a face for the carving in the wood and to Christ. Both foreshadow many similar references throughout the novel and particularly the novel's final moments, in which she destroys the block after saying there were faces everywhere she could have used as models.



Chapters 16, 17, 18 and 19

Chapters 16, 17, 18 and 19 Summary

There are two narrative anchors in these four chapters - the events of the family's first Christmas in the city and the increasing interest from neighbors in Gertie's carving.

Chapter 16 - On a Saturday morning near Christmas, after fending off several door-to-door salesmen, Gertie lets Sophronie and her husband Whit hide the Christmas presents for their children in her already too crowded home. As they chat, a snowball fight between their children (on one side) and the Daly children (on the other) breaks out, becoming nastier as the children start calling each other names. Whit repeatedly tells the increasingly anxious Gertie to not interfere, saying Daly has influence with both the landlord and the police and could easily get people who cross him evicted. Her mind still on the fight, Gertie flings open the door for the terrified Cassie and tries to grab the still-fighting Enoch, but he refuses to come in, becoming bloodier and bloodier as he is hit by a succession of ice-packed snowballs. The one he manages to duck breaks the window in Gertie's back door just as Mrs. Daly comes out of her house ready for church. The Meanwell and Nevels kids immediately try to tell her what her kids have done, but she seems to pay no attention. Later, after the Meanwells have left, Gertie is surprised when Clovis comes home early from work angrier than she has ever seen him before. He explains that a series of wildcat strikes is taking place down at the plant where he works, and becomes even more short tempered as Gertie asks him tentative questions in an effort to understand. His complaints about the union quickly evolve into complaints about Roman Catholics like the Dalys, who he says run the town, the factories, and the unions.

The conversation/argument between Gertie and Clovis is interrupted by a visit from one of Clytie's schoolmates, who wants her to go to the movies with her. Clytie takes Gertie aside and begs to be allowed to go, saying she felt stupid and foolish when she didn't know who some of the movie stars were that the other girls at school were talking about. When he hears that there will also be a western, Enoch also begs to go. Gertie reluctantly gets them money, recalling feeling just as left out when Mother and visiting preachers talked about God and Christ.

Chapter 17 - As Gertie gets Clytie ready for school, they both hear Cassie chatting to her invisible friend Callie Lou. Clytie, not for the first time, tells Gertie other kids are laughing at her. Clytie then shouts for Cassie to hurry up and get ready so they can walk to school together, but Cassie says she doesn't need Clytie to walk with her anymore and runs out the door to prove it. Gertie runs after her, but is too late to prevent her slipping and falling on some ice. The little hen Gertie had carved, which Cassie is taking to school for Show and Tell, goes flying. It's picked up by Mr. Anderson. In his pompous manner of speaking, Mr. Anderson compliments Gertie on her carving and buys it for a dollar. Later, Gertie is surprised to learn that a toy she carved for Clytie to take for a fundraising sale at school sold for two dollars and fifty cents. Also that day, Maggie Daly



comes by and offers to help Gertie learn how to work her stove better if she will fix her wooden statue of St. Francis of Assisi. Gertie agrees, and soon sits down to start the careful work of repairing the statue. Her work is interrupted when Reuben and the other children come home for lunch. She notices that Reuben is even more sullen than usual, and manages to get him to tell her about the teasing he and the other children endure at school.

When the children come home in the afternoon, Gertie is quickly overwhelmed by their squabbling over whose turn it is to listen to the radio, the smells of drying clothes, burning coal and bad cooking, and the bad light. She suddenly slaps Enoch, losing her temper. She keeps dinner waiting for two hours until Clovis comes home, during which time she allows Enoch to play outside with the Dalys, allows Clytie to listen to the radio longer than she is supposed to, and lets Reuben to speak rudely to her. Clovis finally comes home, angry that she has let the children behave as they are and telling her to go and fetch Enoch. She is prevented from finding him by Victor, Max's husband from next door, who assures her that Enoch is all right and then tells her he wants to do some business, offering her fifteen dollars to carve a crucifix for his mother. Gertie agrees, already imagining what the money will do for them when she gets back home and starts her farm.

When she goes back into the house, Clovis complains that her cooking is not as good as it was, ignores her attempts to explain as he complains about how the house is always a mess and asks what she is doing with all the money he is bringing home. She tries to explain that she is saving for their farm but he loses his temper again, talking at angry length about how he is working so hard to improve his family's life and how life in the city demands they live differently. He grabs an old saucepan she brought from Kentucky as an example of the kind of thing they need to get rid of and throws it out into the snow. When Gertie goes out to retrieve it, she is met by Mrs. Daly, who gently suggests that it would be better to leave it with her for a few days until Clovis calms down, and hints that he has been drinking. When Gertie says he doesn't drink, Mrs. Daly tells her men change.

Clytie runs out to tell her that Clovis is only tired and angry because he got moved to another shift at the factory, and that he wants to do some Christmas shopping. Gertie says that she (Clytie) and her father can go and, leaving the saucepan with Mrs. Daly, goes into the house, trying to figure out how to keep both her savings and the money she makes from the crucifix secret.

Chapter 18 - Gertie's Christmas Day is filled with quarrelling and noise as the children argue between themselves over who gets to play with which present, comparing their gifts with those of the other neighborhood children and usually come up short. There is also noise from Clovis as he installs the new washing machine and from the new refrigerator, both of which make the already uncomfortably small kitchen even more confined for the large boned, awkward Gertie. As he works, Clovis complains to Gertie that none of the children seem happy, leading Gertie to comment that a lot of people spend a lot of money and are never happy. Clovis seems to miss the possibility that she is talking about him.



Outside in the open space between the houses, Gertie meets Mrs. Anderson, Max, and Mrs. Daly, who gently intervenes in a squabble between Gertie's children and calms them down. Meanwhile, Mrs. Anderson talks in equal parts jealousy and admiration about Gertie's new refrigerator (which has the brand name of Icy Heart) and telling the dismissive Max that she is un-American for not wanting something as big and expensive. Max, meanwhile, asks Gertie for another dream. When Gertie tells her about a cedar tree back home, Max runs into her house, coming out a moment later and saying it translates into the right numbers. At this point, it can be understood that Max uses the dreams Gertie gives her to help her indulge a gambling habit.

When she goes back inside, Gertie discovers that Cassie has cut up the dress worn by her brand new doll into a dress for her old doll, the one Gertie whittled for her the day they visited the Tipton Place (Chapter 3). Clovis' unhappiness at what she did deepens when Christmas dinner, badly cooked in the still unfamiliar stove and over-chilled in the newly unfamiliar refrigerator, is a disaster.

Chapter 19 - Later that night, as Gertie is attempting to re-cook the turkey, noise from outside draws her to the door where she sees one of her less familiar neighbors making her angry way to Sophronie's front door over the increasingly desperate objections of Sophronie's children. The neighbor knocks on the door, which is first answered by Sophronie's daughter, whose hair has been done in a rainbow of extreme colors, and then by the naked and drunken Sophronie herself. The neighbor quickly runs off as Sophronie comes out, heedless of both the cold and her children's attempts to get her to put on some clothes. She wanders through the housing complex, trying to get her neighbors to come and see the beautiful things she has done to her daughter's hair. Gertie follows her, trying to figure a way to get her back into the house.

Sophronie forces her way into the Andersons', interrupting them as they are preparing to go out for dinner at Mr. Anderson's boss's home. Gertie manages to get Sophronie to lie down and go to sleep, agreeing to stay with the Andersons' children because Maggie Daly, who had agreed to baby-sit, is suddenly unavailable. When the Andersons are gone and the children are asleep, Gertie fills her time by carving a little chickadee out of a piece of maple. Her carving is interrupted by the arrival of Mrs. Daly, who tells her Sophronie had colored her daughter's hair with food coloring, and that she (Mrs. Daly) had managed to get most of it out. Gertie quotes a verse from the Bible referring to how people drink to forget their misery, which can be interpreted as a reference to how Sophronie got drunk. Mrs. Daly sadly comments that she's exactly right. She then returns home. Still later, Max comes by with cold cream and towels to clean the garish makeup off Sophronie's face, and sits with the Anderson children as Gertie carries Sophronie home, puts her to bed, observes the many liquor bottles and destroyed Christmas decorations, and turns off the lights on the Christmas tree. She returns to the Andersons, Max goes home, and Gertie continues carving.

When the Andersons return, it is evident that Mrs. Anderson has been drinking. She makes uncharacteristically blunt comments about how Mr. Anderson's boss is in trouble because a Jew has moved into the neighborhood, about how useless all Mr. Anderson's theoretical studies in psychology are, and how desperate she is to go home to Indiana.



Mr. Anderson, meanwhile, tells Gertie that his boss saw the little hen carving on his desk and wants to pay Gertie to make his wife some dolls. Gertie agrees to a fee and leaves, Mrs. Anderson's whining resentment of her husband's desire to make himself like his boss echoing in her ears.

Chapters 16, 17, 18 and 19 Analysis

This section of the novel develops several of its key themes, relationships, and narrative threads. The theme relating to the nature of money is developed through the Christmas-time tensions displayed both in the Nevels family and in the community in which they live. In this context the size and number of presents appears to have the same value as the size and number of large appliances - the Nevels children are ridiculed by the relative smallness of their Christmas haul in the same way as Gertie and Clovis receive the grudging admiration of their neighbors as the result of acquiring the Icy Heart. The name is symbolically and thematically relevant, in that it suggests that the heart of such money and possession oriented values is indeed cold, an aspect to the Nevels' new life that perhaps serves as the source of much ongoing unhappiness, particularly with Gertie, Reuben and Cassie. This unhappiness is vividly and effectively contrasted with Clytie's and Enoch's joy, easy adaptability, and desire to be seen as being as wealthy as their friends.

The various relationships between Gertie and her neighbors are also developed, with all the neighbors displaying unexpected characteristics. Sophronie's drunkenness is one of these. Mrs. Daly's compassion and wisdom is another. Most notably, Mrs. Anderson reveals unexpected bitterness and perception of her lot and function in life, and it is at this point that the parallels between hers and Gertie's situation become even clearer. Both Gertie and Mrs. Anderson live their lives according to what their husbands want and think they need. Yes, the Andersons are climbing the executive ladder, while Gertie and Clovis are merely struggling to survive, but the point here is that in both marriages, the women's individual natures and dreams are slowly being bent to fit those of their male spouses. Mr. Anderson's request that Gertie carve some dolls for his boss's wife serves two functions - an illustration of the lengths to which Mr. Anderson is prepared to go to ingratiate himself and a simultaneous illustration of the earning potential of Gertie's carving. In this moment, the parallel lines between the two couples' meet, with both Gertie and Mr. Anderson acting in ways that will, they think, improve their lots in life.

The tension filled relationship between workers like Clovis, the union purporting to represent their interests, and the management that has no interest in anything other than profit is hinted at for the first time here. This tension plays a key role in the development of the labor dispute mini-plot that takes center stage in Chapters 33-37.



Chapters 20, 21, 22 and 23

Chapters 20, 21, 22 and 23 Summary

These chapters introduce and develop a second mini-plot, driven by the growing discontent and eventual departure of Gertie's oldest son, Reuben.

Chapter 20 - Sophronie and Whit ask Gertie to watch her sons when she brings them home from having their tonsils out, saying the doctor performing the operation won't hear of them going to the hospital because he won't make as much money. Gertie agrees, and later in the day when the Meanwells return, sits with them and carves in spite of interruptions from Maggie, who is selling lottery tickets, and Mrs. Anderson, who asks for Gertie's help in cleaning her husband's white shirts - Mr. Anderson, it seems has taken to wearing white shirts like his boss. She offers to pay Gertie, and Gertie, who knows Clovis would be angry if she started taking in money to do other people's washing, nevertheless agrees - it can be assumed here that Gertie is doing everything she can to save money so she can go home and buy her farm.

Later that afternoon, sounds of a fight spill into the courtyard between the houses. The Daly boys rush in, followed by a noisy gang of other kids, including Enoch. Gertie is shocked to see a plainly furious Reuben among them. Mr. Daly rushes out of his house and confronts Reuben, accusing him of beating up his boys. Reuben tries to explain that he was trying to break up a fight the Daly boys started, but Mr. Daly does not let him get many words out before he starts mocking him for being a hillbilly. Other children throw snowballs at Mr. Daly, who shouts at them and then turns his angry attention back to Reuben. Gertie sees him reach into his pocket and rushes down to him, aware that his pocket is where he keeps his knife and that he has opened it. Just as he is beginning to pull the knife out, she grabs his wrist and tells him to go into the house. Whit, who has been watching the confrontation, realizes what is going on and helps her push the furious Reuben inside. From the doorway Reuben tries again to tell Mr. Daly what happened and Gertie tries to back him up, but Mr. Daly mocks both of them and threatens to call the police, also accusing Gertie of beating up his wife. Gertie tries to explain what happened that day Mrs. Bales came to the house, saying she was only doing what the Constitution said she had a right to do. Mr. Daly continues to mock her, saying only communists use the Constitution to justify their actions.

Their confrontation is interrupted by the arrival of a police patrol car, which Gertie momentarily fears is after Reuben, but it moves on. Gertie and Mr. Daly retreat to their homes, where Gertie is confronted by an angry Reuben, who accuses her of just standing there and letting Mr. Daly tell lies about him. There are echoes here of Gertie's equal passivity in the face of Mother's accusations about her squandering Henley's money (Chapter 9). She tries to tell him Mr. Daly was both showing off and drunk, but he does not listen. She also tells him he has to stop carrying his knife, but he refuses and stalks off to his room.



That night, Gertie is working on Victor's Christ when she hears Clovis, Whit and other workmen in the complex discuss the death of a female factory worker. They discuss other ways other people have died at work, their conversation eventually turning to the ongoing conflict between unions and management. Gertie, meanwhile, struggles to find the face of the Christ on the Crucifix, but is unable to rid her mind of the image of Reuben's face, angry and hurt. She puts it aside and checks on the Meanwell children, who are both healing fine. Sophronie runs in, her shift having finished, and asks a question embodying the key concern in the minds and hearts of all the parents in the complex, including Gertie - whether the kids are okay.

Chapter 21 - Narration reveals how Gertie spends her time on "the weary, lonesome work of whittling for money," working on Victor's Christ (for which she still is unable to find a face) and on the two dolls for Mr. Anderson's boss. She finds herself unable to work on the cherry wood block, and is still frustrated by her inability to see the face she needs. She also worries a great deal about Reuben, who has become less and less communicative after the argument with Mr. Daly, and Clytie, who has become more and more absorbed in the dramas she listens to on the radio. Finally, she also waits for mail from home, receiving very little until one day she gets a letter from Mother. Amid the usual complaints about her health, Mother includes a piece of shocking information - that she has talked Father into selling the farm, since they can live on the money coming to them from Henley's insurance. Her concern is somewhat surprisingly echoed in Reuben's musings about what his grandfather might be doing, given that it is close to lambing time.

A few days later, Gertie attends an open house at her children's school, and is pleased to hear that Cassie is getting along so well in kindergarten. She expresses concern to the sympathetic Miss Vashinski about Cassie's difficulty reading, but Miss Vashinski assures her she will be fine. She gets positive comments from Enoch's teacher, and is surprised to hear that Reuben is good at the dancing lessons he gets in gym class. This news awakens recollections of the dancing she and Henley used to do, and regret that they were never allowed to fully enjoy it. Her final conference is with Mrs. Whittle, Reuben's hated homeroom teacher who seems more concerned about her appearance since she is preparing to go home to pay much attention to Gertie's concerns about her son. Her temper becomes shorter and shorter, saying that it is Gertie's responsibility to make sure her children adjust. Gertie finally finds the ability to stand up to people accusing her of not taking care of her children (in ways she never stood up to her mother or to Mr. Daly). She asks whether Mrs. Whittle means that her children should learn to adjust so they can "adjust" to living under Hitler, if he won the war, or to living like "communists" if Russia won, or worshipping the Pope if they moved to Rome. Mrs. Whittle loses her temper, accusing Gertie of twisting her words and of not wanting to adjust. Gertie says she's partly right, saying neither she nor Reuben can help the way they're made.

Chapter 22 - It seems for a while to Gertie that Reuben is doing better, but after the new term starts at school he quickly returns to sullenness, at one point making so much angry noise that Clovis is wakened and demands to know what's going on. Only too eager to spread bad news, Clytie and Enoch tell him Reuben got into trouble - other



kids in his class were playing with toy guns, he told how he had a real gun and shot at a bear (Chapter 3), one of the other kids called him a liar, there was a fight, and Reuben hit him. He then walked home by an unapproved route, and according to Clytie will have to see the Principal. Clovis calls Reuben in to see him, Reuben comes in, Clovis confronts him, and Reuben blames everything on Mrs. Whittle and on Gertie going to see her and making things worse. Clovis slaps him, telling him to never talk badly about his mother. He then tells the other children to leave, asking Gertie to stay behind. When they are alone, he berates her for talking to Mrs. Whittle, saying she always expresses herself badly and always makes things worse. Gertie, once again shamed into silence the way she was around Mother and Mr. Daly, goes out to make supper.

The following morning Reuben takes extra time and care getting ready for school. Meanwhile, Clytie sets out without wearing her snow pants, telling Gertie that nobody else in her class wears them. Gertie insists, and Clytie goes to school unhappily. Reuben, evidently nervous and fearful, wearing good clean clothes and taking an extra lunch, also leaves. At the end of the day Cassie comes home happily full of the news that she needs to get glasses so she can read better, but Gertie is more interested in what Clytie and Enoch have to say - Reuben never came to school. Her uneasiness grows until she goes into Cassie's room, where the cherry wood block is, and joins a pretend tea party Cassie is having with Callie Lou.

Chapter 23 - Gertie's concern for the missing Reuben affects her judgment when she shops off Joe's truck - in spite of warnings from Mrs. Daly and Max, she buys a bunch of nice-looking but rotten bananas because Reuben loves them. When she gets them home no-one wants to eat them, and Enoch comments admiringly that Joe and other grocers must make a heap of money off Gertie, who does not seem able to shop well. Later, after the children have gone to bed, Clovis suggests they call the police to let them know about Reuben, but Gertie is fearfully reluctant, saying Reuben has his knife. Clovis tells her to go out and look, it will make her feel better. Gertie bundles up and goes out. Her wanderings take her away from the housing complex, past an open field (where she mistakes a pile of brush for Reuben, thinking he has collapsed with the cold), a dance hall (where she looks inside with faint echoes of old longings at the dancers), and the steel factory. She gets past the fence, even though she knows it is against the rules, and watches as the glowing, white-hot steel is poured. A woman waiting for her husband tells stories of how working in the steel mills kills people, and a foreman tells them both they have to leave. Gertie asks to see Victor from next door in the hope that he will have seen Reuben. A foreman comments that all the women want to see Victor, and then Victor himself comes down, telling Gertie Reuben will be fine, giving her a ride home, and asking whether she has finished the Crucifix yet. Gertie says she still needs to find a face.

When she gets home, Gertie finds out from Enoch that Clovis called the police, and from Clytie that the police not only said that boys ran away all the time but that they seemed suspicious. She tells the children to go back to bed, and then sits for a while struggling to find a face for the Crucifix. She finally refers to the Bible, searching through it but continually returning to a verse referring to Judas. Suddenly she puts the Bible aside and quickly gives "a tortured, furrowed face" to the Christ on the Crucifix.



Clovis comes home in a good mood, having found a note from Reuben in his wallet in which he apologizes for taking money, promises to give it back, and reveals that he has gone back to Kentucky to work with his grandfather. Clovis tells how he yelled with happiness when he found the note, and how surprised he was when the foreman let him go early to bring the good news home. He then looks at the Crucifix with disgust, complaining about how Gertie spent so much time on it when she could have used cheap wood and faster methods. He suggests that she go out and get a jigsaw.

Chapters 20, 21, 22 and 23 Analysis

The mini-plot in this section, tracing the development of Reuben's discontent and his running away, is similar in structure to the first mini-plot (Chapters 6-9). Instead of beginning with a sense of uncertainty, it begins with an incident of confrontation, the argument between Reuben and Mr. Daly. This incident is particularly defined by the threat of violence inherent in the reference to Reuben's knife, a threat that triggers an increasing and very well defined sense of suspense throughout the rest of the mini-plot as it becomes clear to the reader, if not to Gertie, that Reuben has run away. Both the tension and the narrative in this mini-plot climax, reach their highest point of emotion in Clovis' discovery of the note in his wallet.

It is interesting to note that Reuben, who throughout the novel has trouble carving, resorts to his knife as a means to vent his frustration just like Gertie, who is a much better carver. But while she vents through creation (i.e., the figure in the cherry wood block), Reuben comes close to venting through violence. It is also interesting to note, however, that Gertie's knife is also used as an instrument of violence, not by her but by Clovis in Chapter 36. This makes Reuben's near-violence an effective piece of foreshadowing. One final element of interest is the fact that Reuben's hated teacher is named Whittle. Is there an indication here that Reuben hates and resents Gertie's whittling?

Even while this mini-plot takes much of the focus in this section, other key elements of the story's narrative reappear and/or continue to be developed. Among these is Gertie's literal and metaphorical search for Christ - literal in the sense that she is looking for a face for her carving, and metaphorical in the sense that she is looking for Christ's mercy and courage and faith in her life. It is interesting to note that she gives the Christ on Victor's Crucifix a face inspired by the sufferings of Judas, who is known as a betrayer. This suggests that, on some level, Gertie sees Christ as a betrayer; or, more specifically, sees his examples and teachings as betrayals. This is less heretical than it sounds, given that the primary example of Christ's teachings in her life is that which has been filtered through her Mother's self-serving manipulations. From Gertie's perspective, the only Christ she knows and understands *has* betrayed her. Her quest for the face in the block, however, is for the loving and compassionate Christ she has faith is out there. Her destruction of the block at the end of the book represents the loss of that faith.



Another ongoing element is the tension between Clovis and Gertie over her methods of working. Clovis' disgust is typical of his feelings for all Gertie's ways - now that he is in the city all he wants is gadgets and devices, ways to make life's chores go quickly and to make himself look prosperous. The point must be made that he is not seeking prosperity for its own sake - he does still want his family to live a good life. He just sees Gertie's way of going about it as backward. His mention of the jigsaw foreshadows later developments in the narrative as he brings home more and more tools and more and more ideas, all with the goal of making Gertie's work more efficient and cost effective.



Chapters 24, 25, 26, 27 and 28

Chapters 24, 25, 26, 27 and 28 Summary

The narrative focus in this section shifts from Reuben's troubles to Cassie's, troubles that climax in her death and the beginning of an intense sense of grief and loss in Gertie from which she never truly recovers.

Chapter 24 - A postcard from Reuben and a letter from Mother reassure Gertie that Reuben is all right, but the postcard causes her pain because it was sent to Clovis. She feels more pain when Clovis reveals that the only reason Mother allowed Gertie to marry him was that Henley was finally big enough to take over the farm work Gertie had done. Clovis also repeats and repeats his usual complaints that Gertie's carving takes up too much time and is not worth the money she gets paid, and his other complaints that Cassie's talking to herself and "friendship" with Callie Lou are making the other kids think she is strange. Gertie, thinking of Reuben's loneliness, promises him that she will make Cassie let go of Callie Lou.

As spring comes to the housing complex, the women all put a lot of time into cleaning, while Gertie works on another Crucifix, tries to not miss Reuben too much, resents giving her children nickels for popsicles, and gets another carving assignment from Mr. Anderson - this one for his boss's wife. One day, as she is struggling to make the carving fit his specifications, Gertie realizes that it is too late to go back home this year. She needs to farm to make enough money to live on and it is too late to plant anything, meaning that she will have to endure another year in Detroit. Her anger and disappointment is released on Cassie, whom she yells at to stop imagining Callie Lou. Cassie reacts with fear and sadness, playing outside more often but still (as overheard by Gertie) talking quietly to Callie Lou when she thinks no one is listening. As Easter approaches, Gertie makes another mistake - not realizing that the stores are closed on Good Friday, her shopping expedition to pick up supplies for Easter dinner and some candy eggs ends in failure. "[The children] were ashamed because on Easter morning their unit was the only one in the whole alley not visited by the Easter bunny."

Chapter 25 - Gertie becomes suspicious of Cassie's reasons for wearing her outdoor coat inside, demands she take it off, and discovers that Cassie's teacher has sent home a note asking to meet with her. Cassie pleads with her not to go, and Clovis insists that he be the one to go, saying if Gertie goes it will end the same as the meeting she had with Reuben's teacher. Gertie grudgingly agrees, and Clovis says he'll go in a couple of days, once he gets himself some new shoes. Meanwhile, Mrs. Anderson is staging a mild rebellion against her husband's pompous ambitiousness, allowing their children to eat fried food (as opposed to sticking to their regimented diets) and refusing to dress in the way he demands when they go to a cocktail party at another of his boss's.

This party is at the home of a vice-president named MacEckeren, who is on professionally intimate terms with Mr. Flint, the wealthy industrialist who owns the steel



plant and several others. Gertie sits with the Anderson children while their parents are at the party, and is surprised to learn when they return that Mrs. MacEckeren is also Mrs. Bales (the preacher woman from Chapter 15). Mrs. Anderson and Gertie begin to discuss why Mrs. MacEckeren/Bales might have two lives, but their conversation is interrupted by the siren-screaming arrival of a police car, coming to the complex to pick up the heavily pregnant Mrs. Daly and take her to the hospital.

Chapter 26 - In the midst of Mr. Daly's pride at his wife having given birth to a baby girl and of having to keep an eye on his eight other rambunctious children, Gertie becomes more and more concerned about the increasingly miserable Cassie, who one day does not come home from school on time. Gertie goes out looking for her, and discovers her hiding by a fence - she accidentally soiled herself at school and the other children laughed. Gertie takes her home, lies to the rest of the family by saying she slipped and fell in a puddle, and holds her in a rocking chair to comfort her.

After a while, Cassie seems better and Gertie allows her to go outside and play, but the other children in the complex tease her mercilessly and she runs off. Gertie goes looking for her, eventually finding that she climbed through a tiny hole in the fence by the railroad and is playing and arguing with Callie Lou on the railroad tracks. Gertie struggles to get through the hole but cannot manage it, panicking at the approach of a rushing train, and rushing along the fence trying to find another way through. Her thoughts racing with guilty imaginings of what she could and/or should have done, Gertie gets to the tracks and picks up her screaming daughter whose legs have been cut off by the train. Gertie screams for help from the crowd of onlookers who has gathered. She runs towards a recently arrived police car, shouting that she has got money to pay for hospital treatment, but then suddenly stops as she comes to feel that she is absolutely alone with her daughter for the first time since the gift of the doll was made at the Tipton Place. Cassie gasps that she can't see, it's too dark. Gertie assures her that in the dark she can still see Callie Lou. Gertie continues to talk, attempting to keep Cassie from what she (Gertie) imagines to be the grasp of Callie Lou, but it is fruitless . . . Cassie dies.

Chapter 27 - At the hospital Gertie struggles to keep Cassie's body with her and take it back to the complex but is not permitted to do so. At one point she overhears a reference to funerals costing money, and in her grief believes that money will allow her to take Cassie home. She desperately pulls out all her hidden savings and thrusts them at Clovis, but is still forced to leave without Cassie.

Back at the house, Gertie becomes frantic when she cannot see the block of cherry wood. When Clytie tells her she put it in another room, Gertie runs to it and closes the door behind her, convinced that carving will ease her grief. Just as she is sitting down to work the sound of a passing train draws her to the window and she watches it go past, again imagining what she might have done to save Cassie's life. Clovis comes in, suggesting as gently as he can that she wash herself and change clothes - she is covered with blood, both hers from attempting to get through the fence and Cassie's. Gertie starts to talk about going back to Kentucky for good, but Clovis tells her there's



no way they can go back now - they're too late to start farming, and they've got too much debt in the city.

The next few days pass in a kind of blur as the family attends Cassie's funeral. Gertie finds it almost impossible to allow her to be buried - in the cold and with constant noise from overhead airplanes, the same kind of noise that drowned out Gertie's screams.

Chapters 24, 25, 26, 27 and 28 Analysis

It becomes possible to see in this section that not only is Cassie Gertie's favorite child; she is in many ways very much *like* Gertie. The principal similarity, the one most relevant to the narrative, is the way in which they both spend a great deal of time living in the world of their imaginations - Cassie in the world of Callie Lou, Gertie in the world of the cherry wood block. In this context it is important to note how often Gertie enters into the world of Callie Lou and joins Cassie's games. This is their place of surest connection, the fullest and truest way their love and empathy for each other can be expressed.

Later in the book, after Cassie dies and Gertie is continually haunted by images of her daughter's death, she experiences those images as being visited by Callie Lou. In other words, she is haunted by her imagination, prevented from being fully connected to the life of the world around her by what she imagines is the same way Cassie was prevented from a similar connection by Callie Lou. Meanwhile, the narratives of Cassie's death and funeral have an undeniably powerful impact, an impact made even stronger by the skilled application of the "less is more" principal. Only a very, very few telling details of Cassie's condition and Gertie's grief are included, leaving room for the reader to fill in the details of their terror, pain, and fear. In short, the writing is evocative rather than descriptive, and is all the more effective for it.

A pair of highly contrasting narrative elements heightens the effect of Cassie's death: the birth of the Daly baby, and the revelation that the spiritually humble Mrs. Bales and the financially showy Mrs. MacEckeren are one and the same. The former is a clear example of the way life and the world go on even in the face of overwhelming tragedy, the necessary heartlessness of human existence. The latter is a symbolic reiteration of the struggle that plagued Cassie and continues to plague Gertie - the struggle between two different lives, worlds, belief systems, and values. Cassie's earthly life ends because of this struggle. By the end of the book, Gertie's spiritual life has ended. The appearance of Mrs. MacEckeren/Bales suggests that life on both levels is somehow possible, but the negative reaction of Mrs. Anderson here and later in the novel, once she has become more like the Mrs. MacEckeren side, suggests that living life on two sides of one fence is not necessarily desirable.



Chapter 28

Chapter 28 Summary

Gertie lies in bed, partly asleep, partly dazed with remorse, partly fantasizing about how life would have been if she had stayed home, partly trying to get herself to work on the carving - and completely unable to get over her grief. She clings desperately to Amos in her determination to keep him safe, responds mechanically to well-meaning visitors like Sophronie and Mrs. Anderson, and cannot believe her ears when Clovis tells her all the money she gave him went to pay for the funeral and the casket. He explains that because corrupt police officers and funeral directors have a kickback scheme, there's no money left for a marker for Cassie's grave. When he sees how upset Gertie is, he attempts to reassure her by complimenting her on her ability to save, saying that if he'd known she'd saved so much he'd have encouraged her to buy the Tipton Place so they could have a real good home when he came back from Detroit. When Gertie tells him that Mother had told her he didn't want a farm, he says he only wanted Gertie to have what she wanted, and that he hated seeing her and the kids work so hard. She tells him to leave her alone, saying that if she'd known, Cassie would still be alive.

Some time later Max comes, asking again for a dream and saying that she's realized that life in the complex, living according to the way Victor's mother thinks she should live, isn't really a life. Gertie gives her a dream, and then slips into a dream of her own - being back in her own land where flowers and vegetables were growing. Her dreams are interrupted by the roar of a passing train, by Enoch asking for money to plant some grass and flowers, and by Clytie, who tells her the grocer is giving them credit.

After everyone has left her alone, Gertie imagines a glimpse of Callie Lou and follows her out of the house and into the complex, where she watches the Meanwell and Daly children play a game with the Meanwell's new garden hose. The oldest Daly boy, Francis, pretends to be Flint while Claude Jean, the oldest Meanwell, pretends to be his vice president. They get the other kids to line up to pretend to be men looking for jobs, shout that there are no jobs, and then turn the hose on them to disperse them in the way they have evidently seen or heard at the plant. The kids disperse, Francis and Claude Jean take great pleasure in their power, and Gertie watches as the youngest Meanwell daughter takes care of her imaginary child Callie Lou.

Chapter 28 Analysis

This chapter is essentially transitional in nature, bridging the first half of the novel, in which Gertie continues to hold out hope that her dream of family life back home is within reach, and the second half, in which she slowly and unconsciously resigns herself to the dream being gone and her life being in the city. This latter aspect of her journey is foreshadowed in the game played by the children at the end of the chapter, specifically the increasing conflict between the union to which Clovis belongs and management,

conflict that climaxes in the novel's final few chapters with Clovis being beaten and his apparent, retributive killing of the man who beat him.

This sense of transition is heightened by the huge and painful irony of Clovis telling Gertie he would have been happy in the life she dreamed for them. The irony, of course, is that his admission comes too late - not only because Gertie's spirit has been mortally wounded by Cassie's death but also because the family is in too much debt to leave. In other words, spiritually and financially they have been swallowed up by the American Dream and its bottomless appetite for more and more spending, richer and richer appearances, and above all, deeper and deeper surrender.



Chapters 29, 30, 31 and 32

Chapters 29, 30, 31 and 32 Summary

These chapters focus on Gertie's slow, often painful, but occasionally affirming efforts to rejoin the life of her community following Cassie's death.

Chapter 29 - Gertie rouses herself from a days-long doze that is half-sleep and half drug-induced stupor - Mrs. Anderson has been bringing her glass after glass of liquid tranquilizer. She takes a series of careful, tentative steps back into the life of her home and her neighbors, listening with growing impatience to Mrs. Anderson's complaints about her husband and the fact that she's had to give up her painting in order to help him advance in his research and his job. She also looks after Mrs. Anderson's troublesome children. One time while searching for her son, she encounters a woman proudly putting a cactus out on her front step, and then later on the same search, tries not to pay too much attention to the patch job on the fence she pushed herself through in her attempts to rescue Cassie.

As the days pass, Enoch builds a fence around the Nevels' yard with bits of scrap lumber, assisted by Victor and eventually Gertie. One day Max tells Gertie in confidence that she has just won the lottery and is planning to leave Victor, asking Gertie to look after her winnings. Another day Clovis tells Gertie he's constructing tools for her so that her carving will go more quickly, and also warns her that because of labor disputes at work, their income might be inconsistent for a while. The whole time, no matter what she is doing and what she is being told, Gertie's thoughts and dreams are filled with memories of Cassie and grief over her death, both of which she channels into the figure in the block of cherry wood which is slowly but surely taking shape.

Chapter 30 - As summer draws near, the women of the housing complex all seem to be growing things - all but Gertie. This combines with her longing for the earth of home and her desire for something pretty to make her reluctantly accept the offer of some free flowers from Joe the Grocer. In addition, at this time, Gertie overhears troubling conversations between Clovis and some of his co-workers, referring to how a leader of their union who wanted to strike was beaten up and silenced. The conversation hints that members of his own union who wanted to keep working attacked him.

There are other happenings in the complex - Max leaves Victor and takes off for the east coast, saying she's got to see the sea again. Gertie is tempted to keep the money Max gave her, imagining the life back home it could buy, but Max's desperation is so apparent that Gertie hands it all back. Later, a confrontation between Gertie and the Dalys over mud flung at Gertie's washing by some of the rambunctious younger Dalys is averted when the angry Mrs. Daly suddenly notices that Mr. Anderson (who is now better connected to the bosses than Mr. Daly) is listening. Finally, Gertie attends Clytie's graduation from middle school and encounters Cassie's teacher, who sadly says that the only reason she sent the note home was that she was concerned because Cassie



suddenly seemed quieter and sad. Gertie, uncomfortable with sympathy from a relative stranger, angrily wonders how someone with so many students can possibly have the time, the energy, or the interest to care for one.

Chapter 31 - In the middle of a heat wave, the Andersons leave the complex, moving into their new brick house. Over the next few days, several things happen. Clovis tells Gertie there might be an opportunity for overtime, since it looks as though there is going to be a strike in another division of the plant and he and other workers will have to pick up the slack. He also brings home a jigsaw he built out of used electrical parts so that Gertie can make her dolls more quickly.

Meanwhile, Mr. Daly bullies Enoch and several other children with comments about the superiority of Catholic faith, Catholic schools, and Catholic teachers. In addition, new tenants move in to the Andersons' old house, a shell-shocked soldier returning from the war, his troubled wife, and their three young children. Finally, Enoch and Gertie make a trip to purchase some scrap wood for Gertie's carving. At the scrap yard, Enoch practices his slick skills at bargaining and salesmanship, Gertie fights with her conscience as she listens silently to his lies, and the dealer does not fall for any of it. On their way home, Gertie passes the home of the woman with the cactus, and learns that she has had to go to the hospital to take care of her husband who was wounded at work. That night, Gertie and her family make the first jig-sawed doll. Gertie finds it ugly, but everyone else is excited by the saw's potential for increasing their income.

Chapter 32 - The heat wave continues, shortening tempers all round, including those of a pair of police officers who come to investigate a complaint, become annoyed with a stray dog and shoot it, leaving it to die in agony surrounded by weeping children. Shortly afterwards the war ends with the dropping of the atomic bombs in Japan. While the families in the complex comfort their Japanese neighbors, they also wonder what the end of the war will mean for employment. Clovis is particularly worried, leading Gertie to sand and finish a series of dolls he cut for her on the jigsaw. She soon becomes exasperated and turns her attention to the block of cherry wood, but something about the wood makes her reluctant to continue (see "Quotes," Chap. 32, p. 457).

Her efforts are interrupted by Clovis coming home with the news that he has been laid off. This sends the family into full scale production of the dolls, which are quickly standardized in terms of style but have some room for variation in the colors their hair, eyes and clothes are painted. Enoch, the family salesman, goes out and sells several for two dollars and fifty cents each, shouting out that they are hand carved. This upsets Gertie, who is all too aware that there is nothing hand carved about the dolls at all, but she holds her tongue. She becomes even more upset when he tells her he gave one to a policeman for free. Later, she has a brief conversation with Victor in which he asks where Max went and she tells him only that she went to the sea, and then some days later is glad to hear that Clovis has been asked to return to work.



Chapters 29, 30, 31 and 32 Analysis

As Gertie becomes more and more deeply entrenched in the unpleasant work of carving dolls for money, one of her neighbors is taking a parallel journey and another is escaping her similarly torturous existence. Mrs. Anderson is the former, with events in her life paralleling those in Gertie's as the personalities and dreams of both women become subsumed by their husbands' desires. At first, it seems as though she might be escaping, but her final appearance in Chapter 39 indicates that in fact her identity and dreams have, for the most part, been swallowed up in her husband's ever increasing hunger for status and respect from his bosses.

Max is the latter woman, escaping the life forced upon her by Victor and his employers in a way that now Gertie can only weakly imagine. The pathetic image of the viciously shot puppy symbolizes her state of being. Mortally wounded as she has been by the death of Cassie and the disappearance of Reuben, she drags her spirit and dreams behind her in the same way as the dog drags his legs. The dog's death, therefore, foreshadows Gertie's spiritual death at the end of the novel when she takes an ax to the block of cherry wood. This moment is foreshadowed a second time in the imagined whisper of the man in the wood (see "Quotes, p. 457).

Several other important symbols of Gertie's state of mind appear in this section. The first is the heat wave - in the same way as the heat puts unbearable and irresistible pressure on her, so does Clovis' work situation pressure her to the point where she can no longer face down the demands that his job and work environment are making on her. Another symbol can be found in the cactus, which represents the dreams of the yet unscathed young woman who places it so proudly on her step. The reference here foreshadows the reappearances of the cactus in the following section and in the final chapter of the book, in which its symbolic meaning changes. Because the cactus survives for a long time without water, it comes to represent Gertie learning how to survive without hope or dreams. One last symbol is the jigsaw. In its taking over of the primary carving from Gertie, it symbolizes the way the more spiritually connected carving of the cherry wood block is being taken over by the more financially and mechanically connected carving of the cheaply and quickly made dolls.



Chapters 33, 34, 35, 36 and 37

Chapters 33, 34, 35, 36 and 37 Summary

This section contains the novel's last mini-plot, focusing on Clovis and the conflict between labor and management at the factory into which he reluctantly gets drawn.

Chapter 33 - The heat wave breaks, but there is still tension in the complex as the result of the tension building at the factory between the unions and management. One night, Clovis, Whit, and other workers meet to discuss the situation, despite the taunting warnings of Mr. Daly. As they talk, Gertie slips out of the house with two gifts for the Daly family - a little bird she once carved for Maggie and a head of an infant she had carved for the new baby, both of which she had forgotten to give the children during the heat wave. She finds Mrs. Daly sadly ironing the linens for Maggie's hope chest she had so often and so proudly spoken of. Mrs. Daly tells her Maggie's left to become a nun.

Chapter 34 - More hard times hit the complex as more and more workers are laid off, more and more returning soldiers turn to door-to-door peddling as a means of making money, and tensions between unions and management escalate. Life goes on, however - arguments between Mr. Daly and other residents over the merits of the Catholic Church continue, and Enoch and Clytie both go back to school. Gertie's reflections on Clytie's increasing maturity are interrupted by the sudden excitement of a neighbor child shouting that Flint is dead. That excitement blossoms into excitement for the whole complex, along with hopes that with the death of the company's combative owner, the labor tensions will ease. Gertie turns again and again to the block of wood for solace, but discovers that it is getting harder and harder for her to bring the man in the wood, his hands and his face, to life. One night as she works, Whit and a couple of other labor men bring Clovis home. He is seriously wounded in what turns out to be their efforts to prevent their union boss from being beaten.

Chapter 35 - Gertie receives help from a friendly neighbor woman as she struggles to use a pay phone for the first time to call the factory to tell them Clovis is sick - he is not sick in reality, he is recovering from the wounds he received the night before. Gertie goes back home and takes care of the recovering but increasingly angry and vengeful Clovis, who is quickly becoming obsessed with finding the man who beat him up. As Gertie nurses him, she reflects on the lies she has had to tell - to the people at the factory, to the children who cannot know the truth for fear of gossip, and to the people who buy the dolls in the belief they are completely hand carved. At one point Clovis muses, with only a little anger, on how things would have been different if Gertie had bought the Tipton Place and he had gone back home after the war ended - they could have been happy, living a simple life on their farm. The chapter ends with Sophronie bringing the news that the latest strike vote has passed, and with Whit saying it was likely that the strike was going to be a long one.



Chapter 36 - Clovis continues to improve, but the physical and emotional scars left by the beating remain as he becomes obsessed with finding the man who beat him. He repeatedly tells Gertie he could recognize him by the sound of his voice and/or the wounds Clovis left on his face. A few days later, Gertie is buying produce from Joe and uneasily asking for credit when she sees Joe's assistant and recognizes the wounds Clovis described. When she arrives home, her nerves are so shaky that she spills her produce, aware all the time that Clovis has probably recognized the assistant. That night, one of Clovis' co-workers brings over a mechanical sander to speed the doll making, and he and Clovis immediately take it into the bedroom and begin work. As Gertie works on painting dolls that have already been cut out and sanded, she overhears, at one point, the co-worker urging Clovis to forget what happened because there is nothing he can do.

Chapter 37 - Late summer turns into fall. Clovis' mood improves and he whistles around the house, although there is an edgy quality to his whistling that unnerves Gertie. His scars, meanwhile, keep him from going outside - the families in the complex still think he was housebound by the flu. One night Sophronie warns Gertie of a plan being hatched by Clovis, Whit, and other union men to get the women out of the way - for what reason she doesn't know, but she warns Gertie not to fall for it. Later one of the other union wives asks Gertie to go into the city to see a movie with her and Sophronie. In spite of Clovis' insistence, Gertie refuses to go, saying she has got too much work to do. Clovis eventually gives up his attempts to persuade her and goes out on his own, saying he's planning to spend time with Whit. That evening, Gertie realizes there is not enough noise coming from Whit and Sophronie's house. She tries to make herself stop thinking about what the silence means and intends to work on the cherry wood block, but discovers that her knife is missing. She goes next door to ask Clovis for it, but Whit tells her he is asleep and does not let her in. Gertie returns home and tries to go to sleep, but is still awake and worried when Clovis finally comes home, apologizing for borrowing her knife and saying he used it to sharpen pencils at Whit's. The next morning after the children have gone to school and Clovis is still asleep, Gertie takes her knife and examines it, discovering what looks like the remnants of blood at the base of its blades.

Chapters 33, 34, 35, 36 and 37 Analysis

This section is anchored by the novel's final mini-plot: the events that result from the explosive tensions between workers and management at the Flint plant. At this point, it is important to note the significance of Flint's name. "Flint," as a mineral, is known for its hardness and its resistance to erosion or change. This makes the name "Flint" evocative of a certain set of immovable, unsympathetic values, which in this case manifest as the unshakable desire to make as much profit as possible whatever the human cost.

As the mini-plot builds to its suspensefully written climax (Clovis' suspected murder of Joe's assistant), momentum and suspense are also building towards the novel's climax in Chapter 39. This sense of narrative tension is created by such symbolic moments as



the conversation between Mrs. Daly and Gertie about Maggie, the sadness in which foreshadows and symbolizes Gertie's sadness both as she realizes what her husband has done and what she herself must do. Other similar moments include Clovis' brief reference to their imagined life back home on the Tipton Place, which illuminates the trapped-ness he and Gertie are experiencing by contrasting it with the freedom they imagine life on the Tipton Place would have brought their family.

It is in this section that the symbolic value of Gertie's knife transforms from that of being life affirming and life saving to that of being life destroying. It must be noted that at no time does the text explicitly say that Clovis killed Joe's assistant - or anyone, for that matter. The conclusion is all in Gertie and the reader's minds. That being said, there is important symbolic value in the beating itself, and in the scars it leaves behind. The beating represents the way Clovis, Gertie and their family have been beaten into submission by the materialistic demands of the life in which they have found themselves living, while the scars represent the emotional and spiritual scars that both life under the economic rule of Flint and the beating have left behind. In terms of the blood left behind on Gertie's knife, there is the possibility that it represents more than just the death of an unknown person and the beating into submission of the Nevels family. It might also represent the metaphorical shedding of Gertie's spiritual blood at the hands of her husband, his bosses, and their pursuit of prosperity.



Chapters 38 and 39

Chapters 38 and 39 Summary

Chapter 38 - A few days later, Gertie watches nervously as a police patrol car enters the complex, for a while prowls the lanes, and then stops so its drivers can talk with Mr. Daly. Panicked and believing the police are after Clovis, Gertie runs into the house and warns him incoherently. Clovis runs to the door and watches as Gertie runs out the front door, only to see the police car driving on and Mr. Daly watching it leave. He tells her that the police are looking for Enoch, and taunts her with a reference to reform schools. Gertie runs after the police, shouting that Enoch is a good boy. The police stop, and one of them tells Gertie several important things. He says apologetically that he tried several times to get the hole in the fence near the railway tracks where Cassie died patched up, and then adds that he's looking for Enoch to give him the money he owes him for a doll (the one Enoch gave away in Chapter 32). He also tells her it's dangerous for boys Enoch's age to be out on their own at night, and that she should either keep him at home or go out with him. Finally, he and his partner each order carvings - an unpainted doll, and a crucifix like the one Gertie carved for Victor. Gertie returns home, and both she and Clovis are immensely relieved that he has not been caught.

Soon afterwards, Gertie goes to the office complex to pay her rent and to put up a notice advertising her services as a cleaner and laundress. She notices that Clytie has also put up a notice, advertising her services as a babysitter. When she has finished paying the rent, Gertie walks slowly home, knowing that it is Joe's time to be around with the vegetables but not wanting to see that his assistant (who Gertie thinks has been killed by Clovis) is not working for him. Sure enough, the assistant is no longer there - Joe says he has moved to California. Gertie buys a few vegetables from him. When Joe tells her that her credit is good she says that she prefers to pay. Joe glimpses one of the dolls in her basket and buys one.

Chapter 39 - The days pass, and money grows tighter and tighter. Clovis uneasily confesses that he has been unable to get credit, and Gertie takes refuge more and more often in her work on the cherry wood block, and is working on it one day when Mrs. Anderson comes for a visit. Gertie almost does not recognize her - her hair, clothes, and manners are much more sophisticated than they were during the days when she lived in the complex. Mrs. Anderson nervously chats at length about her new life; the constant demands she has to meet in order to help her husband's career, and the demands on their finances as they struggle to keep up appearances. After rapidly drinking what is left of the liquid tranquillizer Gertie has left over from when she was grieving so intently for Cassie, Mrs. Anderson reveals the reason for her visit. The church she now belongs to, the church to which her husband's boss and his wife (who has a secret life as the evangelizing Mrs. Bales - Chapter 15) also belong, is having a fund raising bazaar, and "Mrs. Bales" wants several of Gertie's carvings. Mrs. Anderson gives Gertie fifty dollars for wood, pauses to admire the beauty of Gertie's carved cherry wood block, and leaves.



Clovis and Gertie plan how best to manage the money and the carving, and Gertie goes to the scrap wood dealer to price out supplies. On her way she learns that the woman with the cactus is being evicted from her house for being unable to pay rent - her husband has been incapacitated by his illness. She gives Gertie the cactus to take care of, saying she has always been jealous of Gertie's garden. Gertie never makes it to the scrap wood dealer - she takes the cactus home, puts it in a safe place, and then spends the rest of the night working on the cherry wood carving, sculpting it with fine detail.

The following morning, with Amos' help, she loads the carving into his wagon and takes it to the scrap wood dealer. There, she arranges with him to cut it into more workably sized chunks - it is clearly her intent to use it to make Mrs. Anderson's carvings and save most of the fifty dollars for her family. The dealer says it cannot be cut up as is, it has to be hewn into quarters by an ax - and then he insists that Gertie do it herself. Gertie steels herself, and cuts the block into quarters. One quarter contains the section with the head, and the dealer recognizes what she has been trying to do with the carving - create a Christ. He also recognizes that she could not find a face for it. Gertie tells him that there were millions of faces in Detroit that would have done fine - and then "slowly lift[s] her glance from the block of wood, and wonder seemed mixed in with the pain. "Why," she says, "some a my neighbors down there in th' alley - they would ha done."

Chapters 38 and 39 Analysis

This section builds effectively to the novel's climax: the moment in which Gertie takes an ax to the once cherished block of cherry wood. Her journey of transformation is complete - in this act of what she might call necessary violence, she sacrifices what is left of her dreams and spiritual support in the name of providing for her family. It could be argued that, in chopping up the wood to make dolls, she is doing exactly what she has always dreamed of doing, providing a better life for her children. But because the cherry wood block has the symbolic value it does, representing Gertie's deepest longings and most profound personal truths, it becomes clear that she is anticipating in an almost ritualistic act of sacrifice - destroying her spirit so her body, and those of her children and husband, can be sustained. Mrs. Anderson's appearance at this point in the novel, therefore, is deeply significant, given that her emotional/spiritual journey, as previously discussed, parallels Gertie's. The personalities, dreams, and goals of both women become submerged in those of their husbands, with their spiritual/artistic pursuits (Mrs. Anderson longs to be a painter) both being put into service not in their own fulfillment but in that of their husbands.

All that being said, there is a certain degree of redemption in Gertie's final lines. She seems to realize that she has been blind to many things. These perhaps include the joy, love, friendship, and essentially Christly-ness of the neighbors who have supported her, their courage in struggling to live life on their terms, and their determination to survive the agonies of a world war, a labor/management war, and the war between the perhaps paradoxical human drives for prosperity and peace. All these are the Christ-like attributes she realizes she has missed seeing in her neighbors' faces, in their lives, and

in her own. Perhaps in this moment she realizes she did not need to look as far as she thought she did for Christ's face. Perhaps she should have just looked in a mirror.



Characters

Gertie Nevels

Gertie is the novel's protagonist. From the novel's opening lines right through to its closing, her actions and reactions, feelings and intentions and interpretations of events anchor the narrative. She is strong willed, insistent and determined - in certain circumstances and within certain relationships. When faced with powerful self-righteousness, such as that which motivates her Mother, Mr. Daly, and the never seen but ever present Mr. Flint, her will ebbs away. This tension between courage and fear makes for an interesting tension both in the character and in the narrative, as the reader is led to wonder how she will react and what she will do. Her goal throughout the novel is to provide a good life for her children. The journey of transformation she undergoes sees that dream being made over from the farm life she has always envisioned to the city life envisioned by her husband.

Clovis

This character is Gertie's husband, a simple, uneducated mechanic whose actions throughout the novel can be summed up this way: he does the wrong thing for the right reasons. He loves his wife and children and is as determined as Gertie is to provide a good life for them - these are the right reasons. The wrong thing is imagining that life can be found in the city and insisting that they join him in his struggle to make it happen. He is one of the novel's principal antagonists, acting as he does in opposition to Gertie.

Reuben

Reuben is Gertie's eldest child. Moody and sullen, he is perhaps even more drawn to life on the farm than his mother. He is the most reluctant of the children to move to the city. His running away from home and back to the farm is the first of several blows to Gertie's self-confidence, her faith in her dreams, and her faith in Christ.

Cassie

Cassie is Gertie's youngest daughter, and her favorite child. As previously discussed, she is the child most like her mother - both have a vivid imagination and take solace and private joy in the things they imagine and dream. After Reuben, she is the child most damaged by the move to the city. Unlike Reuben, however, Cassie does not find a way to escape. Her tragic death is a result of her becoming, in spite of Gertie's best efforts, more and more drawn to her imaginary, and much safer, world. After her death, Gertie descends into a deep depression from which she never fully recovers.



Clytie, Enoch, Amos

These are Gertie and Clovis' three middle children. Their characters are less multi-faceted than those of Reuben and Cassie, but their personalities are nevertheless vividly defined and consistently developed. Clytie is materialistic, always concerned with possessions, appearances, and what other people will think. Enoch is also materialistic, but in a different way - he is much more aware of money than Clytie is, how it is made, how it is manipulated, and the power it brings. Significantly, these two children are the ones that remain in Gertie's home. Their presence symbolizes and embodies the novel's key theme about the pervasive power of materialism and consumerism. Amos, the youngest child, is little more than a baby throughout the novel and as such has little or no personality. His primary function is to serve as the catalyst and/or motivation of the action in the first few chapters, which define Gertie's essential character.

Gertie's Parents

Gertie's mother and father appear in person only in the first few chapters, but are referred to in passing throughout the novel. Mother has a profoundly negative influence, with her self-serving manipulative nature disguised as an almost comically intense piety. Father is a much quieter, earthier personality, overwhelmed in their home by Mother in the same way as Gertie is overwhelmed by Clovis in her home. This state of being, in both Gertie and Father, embodies the way that simply living according to one's true nature can be overwhelmed by the self-serving manipulations of consumerism.

Henley

Henley is Gertie's beloved younger brother, killed in battle in World War II before the story actually begins. Her grief at his death haunts Gertie throughout the early sections of the book. On the other hand, his wish that she be given his money enables her to come tantalizingly close to realizing her dream. His physical death foreshadows her spiritual death.

Sophonie and Whit Meanwell

The Meanwells are one of several families that live in the housing complex that Gertie and Clovis move into. Whit is active in Clovis' union, and is portrayed as having little life or personality apart from his job. Sophronie is a hard working, hard drinking, and hard partying, but has a good heart - when she is sober enough to let it be revealed.

Max and Victor

Max (a woman, her name is probably short for Maxine) and Victor live next door to Gertie and Clovis. Their emotional and physical proximity is one of the aspects of life in



the housing complex that makes Gertie most uncomfortable. His mother essentially runs Victor's life in the same way that Gertie's is run by hers and Clovis' is run by Flint. Max, a lottery playing dreamer, struggles in the same way as Gertie to escape from the physical and spiritual prison in which she finds herself. Unlike Gertie, Max manages to escape. Her repeated request that Gertie give her "a dream," which she uses to guide her in her regular playing of the lottery, symbolizes the way Gertie is always being asked by those around her (particularly her children and her husband) to give up pieces of her dream for a good life.

Mr. and Mrs. Anderson

These two are parallel characters to Gertie and Clovis. Mr. Anderson's and Clovis' dreams of success and advancement are similar, even though Mr. Anderson dreams of becoming powerful while Clovis only dreams of being a good provider. At their core, both men are determined to improve their lot in life. Mrs. Anderson and Gertie both give up their dreams of being creative and how they would prefer to raise their children in order to help their husbands realize their dreams. At the end of the novel, both women have completely emptied themselves of spiritual independence. Mrs. Anderson has become the perfect corporate wife, while Gertie has become the perfect breadwinner in the absence of her husband's income. Neither women end up living the life they intended.

The Dalys

Mr. and Mrs. Daly and their numerous children (nine at last count) also live in the same residential complex as Gertie and Clovis. They embody the pervasive and powerful influence of the Roman Catholic Church on almost all aspects of working life in the complex, and indeed in Detroit. Mrs. Daly is emotionally volatile, a screaming shrew one minute, and a tender, sympathetic caregiver the next. Mr. Daly is arrogant, self-righteous, and at times downright cruel in his insistent determination to belittle those he thinks are inferior. They are personal antagonists and embody the societal antagonism of the world in which Gertie and Clovis are struggling to survive.

Mrs. Bales

Mrs. Bales is one of the most intriguing and unexplained characters in the novel. Her first appearance is in person as a door-to-door preacher. Her later appearance is only spoken about by Mrs. Anderson, who reveals that she (Mrs. Bales) is in fact Mrs. MacEckeren, a corporate wife of the sort that Mr. Anderson wants his wife to become. As previously discussed, she represents a possible way for women like Gertie and Mrs. Anderson to integrate differing and contrasting sides of their personality, a lesson that Gertie and Mrs. Anderson are unable to learn.

Flint

This character never appears in person but is a constant presence both as a person (spoken of repeatedly and always with fear), and as a symbolic representative of the capitalist, consumerist system that swallows up the Nevells family and so many others. He is ruthless, greedy, acquisitive, Catholic and unsympathetic to the workingman, at least from the perspective of those he employs. He is an antagonist of concept as much as he is an antagonist of personal relationship.



Objects/Places

Gertie's Knife

Gertie's knife is a symbol of life force. It brings Amos back to life and throughout the novel anchors Gertie in times of fear or doubt or uncertainty. She frequently reaches into her pocket and touches it for comfort. It is a touchstone to her soul. Its purity of purpose is slowly corrupted by Gertie's increasing use of it on what might be called "commercial" carving, a process brought to a jarring and complete conclusion when Clovis apparently uses it to commit murder.

The Cherry Wood Block

The cherry wood block is a symbol not just of Gertie's life force, but also of her dreams and her determination to bring them to life. It is another so-called touchstone to her soul. In the same way as she turns to the knife in times of trouble, she also turns to the cherry wood block, finding particular comfort in it following Cassie's death. The fact that Gertie surrenders it after Clovis steals the knife is no coincidence - the knife has lost its meaning for her in the same way as her dreams, therefore she has no reason to hold onto the cherry wood block, the embodiment of her dreams, any longer.

The Tipton Place

This large and well-kept farm with its roomy, strongly constructed house is the embodiment of Gertie's dreams for a good life for her family. Mother manipulates Gertie into letting the Place go, representing the way Mother has never respected Gertie for who she is. Clovis' admission that he would have joined her on the Place if he had only knew her plans represents the way that they essentially want the same things. They have just mis-communicated, misunderstood each other, and made mistaken choices, with tragic results.

Cassie's Doll

The little doll quickly carved by Gertie when she and Cassie are visiting the Tipton Place (Chapter 3) represents the kinship of their spirits, the joy they share, and their hopes for a new and better life. It reappears notably on two other occasions. The first is when Cassie cuts up the dress of the new doll she got for Christmas and puts it on the old doll. This represents the way that both she and Gertie live their life in the city as though it will provide everything they need to bring their old dreams to life. The second important reappearance is at Cassie's burial, when it is buried with the body. This represents the way that, with Cassie's death, her and Gertie's dreams of returning home are also dead.



18911 Merry Hill

This address, which becomes the new home for Clovis and Gertie and their children, provides a direct and vivid contrast to the Tipton Place. It is shabbily made, small, overcrowded, and too close to neighbors - all attributes that are exactly the opposite of the roomy, welcoming home that Gertie and Clovis might have had if they had just talked to each other. The several new appliances here, including the Icy Heart refrigerator, embody the oppression of consumerism, the spirit of acquisition, and the definition of the American Dream that becomes so oppressive - money equals possession equals success.

Clovis' Tools

Specifically, Clovis' tools include the jigsaw and sander Clovis constructs to speed up the production of Gertie's dolls. Like the Icy Heart and the other appliances, the tools represent and embody endless demands for money that the Nevels family finds itself caught up in.

The Shot Dog

The pointless and wrenching physical death of the dog, who interestingly enough loses the use of his legs in the same way that Cassie loses the use of hers (albeit in a different way) represents Gertie's equally pointless and similarly wrenching spiritual death.

Gertie's Painted Dolls

These quickly, cheaply, and casually made dolls represent the process of transformation undergone by Gertie and her family. The dolls are carved from old, cast-off wood covered in old paint in the same way that Gertie and Clovis live traditionally, in simple ways cast off in the ever-advancing march of consumerism. Removal of old paint from the wood and the stroking on of new symbolizes what is happening to Gertie and her family - the last remnants of their old life, and Gertie's old dreams, are being rubbed off them to make way for their bright, showy, apparently prosperous new life.

Clovis' Scars

These facial scars are acquired in a fight between union members and management thugs. The fight itself represents the larger fight between union and management throughout the Flint manufacturing system. The scars hold Clovis indoors, trapping him in the same way that his working life has trapped him in a cycle of violence, poverty, and desperately striving for more.

The Cactus

This is one of the novel's most delicate and poignant symbols. It appears in the novel's final chapters, at the point when Gertie's spirit is at its lowest and most wounded, as a symbol of long-lasting hope. Its presence suggests that in the way a cactus can survive without water, Gertie can survive without her dreams.



Social Sensitivity

Harriette Arnow's finest and bestknown novel is *The Dollmaker* (1954), the third volume in a trilogy which, covering the years between 1920 and 1945, depicts the Southern rural poor in their beautiful but impoverished homeland and traces the losses that occurred in their culture as economic conditions and social change forced them to migrate to industrial areas. Set during World War II, this novel narrates the compelling story of Gertie Nevels, a country woman rooted in Appalachia who, when the war takes her husband north to work in a defense plant, leaves the hills of Kentucky for a housing project in Detroit where she engages in a long and ultimately futile struggle to preserve the decency and integrity of her family. Along with its value as a socioliterary document detailing the specific plight of Southerners who migrated north during the "war effort" of the 1940s, the novel powerfully conveys a sense of the alienation, ugliness, and misery that all too often characterize urban industrial societies. Racial and ethnic prejudice, hazardous working conditions and labor strife, exploitation by landlords and public administrators, and the effect on children of slum life are some of the issues the author incorporates into her story to emphasize how such societies can crush the poor. Arnow's sensitive depiction of poor whites and her use of their poverty to comment on failures in the American socioeconomic system undoubtedly contributed to creating the popularity her novel enjoyed at the time of its publication and to fostering the attention it has received since its revival in the 1970s.



Techniques

Arnow skillfully organizes Gertie's story around a major symbol, the large block of cherry-wood which she carves during moments of intense emotion and which provides her with an outlet for self-expression. Indeed, the evolution of Gertie's ideas about what to create from this piece of wood and the uses she makes of it during the novel reflect her whole history. At first, she wants to sculpt the wood into the figure of the laughing Christ that symbolically characterizes her initially positive approach to life, but after she has begun to feel that by coming to Detroit she has betrayed her children and herself, she decides that the wood should be carved into the figure of a repentant Judas. At the same time, as the force of her creative spirit weakens under the burdens of her everyday life, her mastery over the fate of the wood diminishes until she abandons the idea of transforming it into a unique and meaningful sculpture for herself and sacrifices it to economic necessity.

Thus, the powerful image of the block of wood about to be chopped up into pieces she can use to make simple dolls to sell in order to support her family, brings Gertie's narrative to a somber conclusion.

Other important symbols in the novel are Gertie's woodcarving knife and Cassie's imaginary playmate, Callie Lou. That the knife first symbolizes Gertie's vitality and courage is expressed in the opening scene when she uses it to perform an emergency tracheotomy on her youngest child. In chilling contrast, by the end of the story, the knife symbolizes her loss of potency when, having literally been taken away from her and made into an instrument of corruption and death, it is used by Clovis to perform the murder. A similarly meaningful transformation occurs in Arnow's treatment of Cassie's imaginary friend, Callie Lou.

She is allowed to become a part of the family in Kentucky, but in Detroit the family fears that Callie Lou's "existence" might make people think Cassie is queer. Significantly, Cassie gets killed shortly after Gertie makes the tragic error of telling her to forget her playmate, without realizing that in so doing she is asking her daughter to suppress the last vestiges of her Kentucky identity.

Along with symbolism, in *The Dollmaker* Arnow utilizes with great competence a number of narrative techniques typical of the naturalistic novel. In particular, her story has a chronological development that reaches several climaxes in highly dramatic scenes, carefully describes the motivations and responses of the characters to all important events, makes extensive use of detail to convey a sense of authenticity, and relies on contrast to highlight the major themes. Other distinguishing characteristics of the author's mode of narration are a careful interweaving of plot, character, and place and the ability to convincingly reproduce the language of Kentucky mountaineers.

Themes

Themes

Several interrelated themes give *The Dollmaker* a rich complexity that engages readers' imaginations and stimulates their social awareness. As Arnow dramatizes the experiences of the Nevels family, she presents an inverted version of the classic story about "the American Dream" of promise, possibility, and opportunity for all who are willing to work hard. Gertie, in fact, allows herself to be dissuaded from buying a farm in Kentucky and convinced into following her husband to Detroit because she is led to believe that there her family will be assured of employment, adequate housing, and education for the children. But in Detroit, her search for a better life and a new prosperity soon becomes a bitter struggle for mere survival as she grapples with a variety of overwhelmingly negative social, economic, and political forces.

The contrast Arnow draws between Gertie's Kentucky homeland and her new surroundings in Detroit develops the theme of the superiority of the rural way of life over the conditions of urban living. Without portraying an overly idyllic view of life in the southern hills, *The Dollmaker* presents rural Kentucky as an environment that allows individuals to have a healthy relationship to nature and stimulates their feelings of self-worth and independence along with their development of a sense of community responsibility.

The Detroit depicted in this novel is instead characterized by the dirt and noise of its factories, the cramped living quarters and treeless streets of its housing projects, and the indifference of most of its inhabitants. Moreover, the environment of Detroit exerts pressure on hill people to conform to its own standardized mediocrity, thereby hastening the destruction of rural culture. Given the differences between these two environments, it is not surprising that the image of Kentucky which remains in Gertie's mind should be that of an Eden from which she has been separated against her will and to which she longs to return, while Detroit seems to her to be hellishly oppressive and dangerously hostile.

Because throughout her experiences in Kentucky and Detroit Gertie seeks solace and encouragement in the Bible, from which she is able to quote extensively and appropriately, her story has a strong religious undercurrent. This motif sometimes takes the form of an explicitly religious theme in passages that delineate two conflicting images of God between which Gertie feels torn.

Since childhood, Gertie has instinctively associated God with love, nature, and the common man, qualities which at the start of the novel she would like to capture in the figure of the laughing Christ in workman's overalls that she wants to carve from a large block of cherry-wood. However, her struggles in Detroit soon begin to obscure this positive image and, although she tries to resist sinking into pessimism, she is ultimately



led to suspect that only a God of wrath and vengeance would allow war, permit the rich to exploit the poor, and ignore the suffering of so many of His children.

Living the American Dream

The American Dream is traditionally defined according to the words of the United States Constitution, which indicates that the country was founded with the goal of providing the opportunity for "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness." This is certainly the core motivation of *The Dollmaker's* central characters. Gertie and Clovis, along with most of the people around them, want what they want and do what they do in order to realize the goal of living life the way they want, have the liberty to do so, and find happiness within that. In Gertie's case, her carving symbolizes this motivation, her determination to "carve" or create her own life and destiny. For Clovis, making as much money as possible and having as many up-to-date possessions as possible are simultaneously the manifestations of *his* motivation, and his definition of "happiness." Herein lies what some might call the dark side of the American Dream - how, over the course of the more than two hundred years since the Constitution was written, "the pursuit of happiness" has been interpreted to mean the accumulation of as much money, as many possessions, and as much power as possible.

This is what happens to Clovis, to Clytie and Enoch, and to several of the other inhabitants of the residential complex. For Clovis, the appearance of prosperity, including both the acquisition of status symbols like the Icy Heart refrigerator and the acquisition of respect from both his fellow union members and management, become his priority. He does not seem to be aware of the suffering his increasingly relentless pursuit of this goal is causing members of his family, Gertie, Cassie, and Reuben in particular. In this context, it is possible to see these latter characters as embodying the true spirit of the American Dream, in that their definitions of life, liberty, and happiness seem more organically anchored in their individual natures. On the other hand, Clovis, Clytie, Enoch, the Dalys, the Andersons, and above all, Flint, can easily be seen as embodying the dark side. It may not be going too far to suggest that the disappearance of Reuben, the death of Cassie, and the capitulation of Gertie all define *The Dollmaker* as a human tragedy - spirit overcome by substance.

Spiritual Transcendence

On the other hand, there is also the possibility that the story of the novel can be seen as exploring the theme of the ultimate power of the human spirit - specifically, the power and courage and ability to survive and continue found in Gertie Nevels. As previously discussed, her determination is evident from the novel's opening lines. Yes, she becomes increasingly overwhelmed and almost completely destroyed by the challenges and tragedies she encounters. Ultimately, however, her spirit triumphs - she recognizes the Christ in all the people around her, their courage, joy, and power.



Like Christ, who transcended the earthly suffering He experienced on the Cross -- Gertie, at the end of the novel, sees the potential for transcending earthly suffering herself. It is almost as though she looks at the Christ in the cherry wood block as perhaps a false Christ, a graven image as the Ten Commandments (and Gertie's ultra-religious Mother) might have called it. This realization of the potential for individual transcendence and triumph can be seen as the purest manifestation of the American Dream. The irony, of course, is that she comes to that realization within the context of bringing more money into her family that, as has been discussed, can in turn be seen as a manifestation of "the dark side" of that Dream. Perhaps the point here is that even within a life defined by consumerism and the spirit of acquisition, spiritual transcendence is still possible. It is possible that, by the end of the book, Gertie has discovered the key to living the two apparently contradictory sides of life in the same way as Mrs. Bales/MacEckeren. Perhaps in her life after she leaves the scrap wood shop, Gertie becomes happy.

Love

The characters of this book rarely say the actual word "love." When Clovis says it to Gertie, she roughly brushes him away, and when the question of her feelings for Victor come up, Max dismisses the idea that love is even part of the equation. That does not mean that love is not a motivating force, or that manifestations of it are not a motivating force of the action. What is important to note is that love in *The Dollmaker* is a two edged sword. On the one hand, it cuts away what Gertie might describe as foolishness, the waste of time or money or energy or skill on relationships or actions that do not lovingly provide a better life for her children.

On the other hand, it motivates Clovis, as previously discussed, to do the wrong thing for the right reasons - it is love of his children and his wife that drives him to make the eventual spiritually corrosive choices he makes. The love of parents for children also has two sides. There is Gertie's complete devotion to her children, which on the one hand leads to nurturing and joy and on the other hand leads to smothering and resentment. There is Mother's capacity for love, with what she would see as her devotion to Jesus contrasted with her lack of genuine, unconditional love for either of her children (Gertie or Henley). There is the love of individuals for possessions - Gertie's love for the Tipton Place, while admirable in many ways, blinds her and obsesses her in much the same way as Clovis' love for the Icy Heart, his car, and for the labor saving tools he creates for Gertie. In short, *The Dollmaker* portrays in both its actions and thematic explorations the two sides of love - the tender part that makes life and its suffering worth while, and the hard-edged part that quickly turns into greed, ambition and over-reaching desire.



Style

Point of View

The story is told from the third person, but its primary focus is on Gertie - her actions, reactions, feelings, interpretations of events, and process of transformation. This aspect of *The Dollmaker* is developed in careful, at times exquisite detail - the same kind of detail with which Gertie carves her dolls and the Christ figure in the cherry wood block. That being said, there are sections in the book in which she plays an *active* role and others in which she is much more *reactive*. Interestingly it is in the novel's first third, containing the episode of her trip to the doctor with Amos and the near-acquisition of the Tipton Place, in which she is the most active, pursuing her goals with determination.

In the latter two thirds of the novel, when she moves to Detroit and struggles with all the challenges of settling there, she is much more reactive, being driven and directed by characters and events rather than doing the driving as she has done before. This is a stylistic echo of her spiritual transformation from a creator of her life into a re-creator of the lives and goals and situations of others. Throughout the novel, however, the perspective of the narrative remains the same. Gertie is at the heart of everything; or rather, Gertie's *heart* is at the heart.

Setting

There are two key components to the novel's setting. Both help define Gertie's process of transformation in the same way as her shift from being active to reactive, and both are delineated by the same point in the action, which is Gertie's moving from the country to the city. The first third of the novel is set in the backwoods of Kentucky, that raw, natural land in which she grew up, where she feels at home and where she feels it possible to live her dreams. The writing in this setting has a strong back-to-nature sensibility. Living things are everywhere - trees, animals, flowers, and hopes. The latter two thirds of the novel are set in the city; which, for the most part, comes across as being entirely man-made. Here Gertie is usually surrounded by inanimate objects that overwhelm her spirit and crowd her body. Her meager attempts to bring glimpses of nature into the wholly constructed world of Detroit meet with some success and even a degree of admiration from others in her housing complex.

The overwhelming presence of noise, the nearby steel factory, airplanes and trains, and above all the man-made struggle for evident financial prosperity, however, overwhelm what little solace she gets from her trampled marigolds. A vivid example of the way setting affects Gertie and defines her transformation can be found in the food she serves. In the first part of the novel, back home in Kentucky, her food is homemade and includes biscuits, gravy, and eggs laid by her own chickens. The final meal she serves in the book, at the point where she has become completely overwhelmed by the material world, is spaghetti (which she had never even heard of back home) covered



with canned tomato soup. At this point, the victory of the processed over the natural seems complete - and irreversible.

Language and Meaning

There is a powerful use of the literary device of contrast in this book. The narrative is written in prose that is at times raw and direct, and at times extremely poetic, but is always evocative and, on a technical level, almost always grammatical. This is contrasted with the dialogue written for Gertie, her family, other folks from Kentucky, and other perhaps less educated characters like the Meanwells and Dalys. Their dialogue is written with careful attention to how the characters' words actually sound - lots of contractions, dropped g's on words ending in -ing like "baking" or "seeing," and incomplete sentences. In other words, they are generally *un*-grammatical.

The contrast here can be seen as illuminating the contrast between the world of spirit, where dreams, hopes, and love reside, and the physical world of work where struggle, ambition, greed, fear, and anger are born. That being said, there are moments when even in their inarticulateness, Gertie and Clovis in very few words manage to convey great depths of affection. At the same time, in the midst of all his ungrammatical rantings, Mr. Daly conveys very clearly the dark pettiness at the core of his being. For the most part, however, the contrast between prose and dialogue helps define the difference between who the characters *are* and what the characters *do*. Another effective use of language can be found in the way images relating to one aspect of the story carry reflections of another. A vivid example can be found in the references to blood and wood contained in the description of Cassie's death (see "Quotes," Chap. 26). The reference to blood seeping from Gertie's hands after tearing at the wood of the fence carries echoes of the spiritual blood spilling from her soul when she is performing the "weary, lonesome work of whittling for money" (*ibid*, Chap. 21).

Structure

There are several important structural elements in *The Dollmaker*. First among these is its previously discussed division into the first third, in which Gertie is spiritually and physically at home, and the latter two thirds, in which she is spiritually and physically alienated from the world around her. This element, also as previously discussed, plays a key role in defining her thematically significant transformation. Another key structural element is the use of mini-plots, which can be defined as "buying and losing the Tipton Place," "Reuben runs away," "Cassie is killed," and "Clovis fights for the union's life." Each of these plots builds to its own climax, which the narrative then uses as a springboard into the narrative's next phase. This sense of repeated climax creates an effective sense of escalating conflict and momentum, as it gets progressively harder and harder for Gertie to hold on to the dreams and values that have defined her entire life. Linking those mini-plots are chapters that at times tend to lack narrative focus. Yes Gertie is always at the center of the action, with her feelings, actions, and reactions at the heart of every moment. That being said, however, there are lengthy sections



between the climax of the "losing the Tipton Place" mini-plot and the beginning of the "Reuben runs away" plot that seem to have relatively little impact on the overall "Gertie loses her dreams" plot. This is not to say that these sections ought to be viewed or defined as padding - they work well to create a physical, emotional, and spiritual context for Gertie's story. They are simply oriented less towards plot and more towards atmosphere and character.



Quotes

"They reached the highway, stretching empty between the pines, silent, no sign of cars or people, as if it were not a road at all, but some lost island of asphalt coming from no place, going nowhere." Chap. 1, p.1

"[Gertie] tried an instant to look into the sky to find the north star and so find herself, but the lights were bright and the clouds an even gray so that as she sat on the top porch step and drank her coffee she knew not where she was." Chap. 2, p. 29.

"The waving hair might have twisted into curls on its ends, but the curls, like the face, were buried in the wood. There was only the top of a head . . . but plainly someone there, crouching, a secret being hidden in the wood, waiting to rise and shed the wood and be done with the hiding." Chap. 3, p. 39.

"Suddenly the timbered hills, the fields rolling down to the river, the white-painted house with its two stone chimneys, the barns with the smaller outbuildings huddled about them, all these were no longer as they had been . . . Henley was dead." Chap. 4, p. 50

"When Clovis was gone and she was settled on the farm, she would work again on the block of wood . . . she'd waited so many years, and now there was no need to wait. She had her land - as good as had it - and the face was plain, the laughing Christ, a Christ for Henley." Chap. 5, p. 69.

"It couldn't be true. So many times she'd thought of that other woman, and now she was that woman. 'She considereth a field and buyeth it; with the fruit of her own hands she planteth a vineyard.'" Chap. 6, p. 98.

"She had an instant's understanding of why people shouted in church. They saw the things that Moses saw when he looked across the mountains to the Promised Land, or that the thief saw when Christ said 'This day, thou shalt be with me in paradise.'" Chap. 7, pp. 111-112.

"It came to [Gertie] that maybe she had always known those other trees would never be her own . . . just as she had always known that Christ would never come out of the cherry wood." Chap. 9, p. 128.

"[Gertie] remembered with something close to comfort that she had brought the block of wood, brought it in spite of her mother's scorn and Clytie's gentle objections . . . Judas wood it seemed now. Jesus would never come from it. But there were faces in Detroit." Chap. 10, p. 132.

"[Gertie] had never lived with a clock since leaving her mother's house, and even there the cuckoo clock had seemed more ornament than a god measuring time; for in her mother's house, as in her own, time had been shaped by the needs of the land and the animals swinging through the seasons." Chap. 14, p. 187.



"Lots a grown people never git and never know what they want. They spend money, hopen it'll satisfy em, like a man a hunten matches in a strange dark house." Gertie to Clovis, Chap. 18, p. 247.

"She could raise bushels of sweet potatoes, fatten a pig, kill it, and make good sausage meat, but she didn't know how to buy. She could born a fine and laughing boy baby and make him grow up big and strong, but inside him all his laughter died." Chap. 23, p. 318.

"Blood oozed from her forehead, her neck, her shoulders, her ears, from her battle with the wood and her torn hands dripped more blood." Chap. 26, p. 368.

"She sat still and straight in a too small chair; her mouth a bleak straight line of determination under eyes that were bewildered as a lost child's eyes, some strange child who, even as it begs to find the way home, knows there is no finding the way, for the home and all other things at the end of the way are also lost." Chap. 27, p. 380.

"[Gertie] turned back to the block of wood. One side now was no block of wood at all, but the cloth-draped shoulders of someone tired or old, more likely tired, for the shoulders, the sagging head, bespoke a weariness unto death." Chap. 29, p.400

"[Gertie]'s mother in her last letter had said nothing of [Reuben]; she'd only written of what a sweet child Cassie had been; and told of how nightly she prayed to God that Gertie would take better care of the others, and look upon this death of a loved one as an act of God chastising her" Chap. 30, p. 422.

"Enoch suggested that they put a sign over the bedroom door, 'Nevels' Woodworking Plant' . . . it would be better to put No. 1 after the name so that people passing by would think there was more than one" Chap. 31, p. 436.

"[the dog] had at first run round and round, dragging its fly-covered intestines and spreading blood, lying still only when its legs could no longer hold it up - but always it had whined and cried . . . nobody had had the heart to kill [it] in front of the children; and as always, in the crowding and the heat, it was the children who got hurt the worst." Chap. 32, p. 451.

"She . . . turned to the block of wood; for more than her walks through the alleys . . . the man in the wood gave rest and peace from thoughts of the things lost behind her and the things ahead she feared. Tonight, however . . . the faceless man was whispering, 'There's no money in me!'" Chap. 32, p. 457.

"The work of creating ugliness was worse than the sneezy, stinking job of getting off the old paint; the new paint smelled more strongly than the old, and, try as she would, she could not keep it off her hands; the feel of the sticky stuff, especially the bright, bloody red, nauseated her." Chap. 32, p. 459.

"Life and money: could a body separate the two?" Chap. 37, p. 516.



"Would [Gertie] in time feel toward [Clovis] as toward her mother? She couldn't live with him and feel that way." Chap. 38, p. 523

"Gradually the man in the wood brought some calmness to her; he was alive; the hands, the head, even the face were there; she had only to pull the curtain of wood away, and the eyes would look down at her. They would hold no quarreling, no scolding, no questions." Chap. 39, p. 535.

"She was so still; it was as if by steadfastly looking at the wood, she, too, had changed into wood." Chap. 39, p. 548.

Adaptations

As soon as Jane Fonda read *The Dollmaker* in 1971, she envisioned transforming the novel into a film with herself as Gertie Nevels. In 1979, ABCTV agreed to such an undertaking which finally came to realization in 1984. The television movie, adapted from the novel by Susan Cooper and Hume Cronyn and directed by Daniel Petrie, featured Fonda in the leading role, along with Levon Helm as Clovis and several talented youngsters from Tennessee as their children. The scenes set in Appalachia were shot on location in the Smoky Mountains of Tennessee while an abandoned steel mill in Chicago doubled for the factory and housing project in Detroit. Aired on May 13, 1984, the television production was highly praised for its excellent performances, fine photography, and appropriate soundtrack of traditional mountain music. Some reviewers, however, were disturbed by what they felt was an excessive emphasis on reproducing the peculiarities of mountain speech and by some scenes which they judged to be overly melodramatic. Despite the difficulties involved in condensing such a lengthy story into a manageable film version, the television production retains much of the emotional power of the novel and, with one important exception, generally respects its essential thematic and plot patterns. The exception regards the ending, which is less bleak than in the novel since, at the close of the movie, the scriptwriters allow Gertie to return to her home in the Kentucky hills.



Topics for Discussion

Discuss which way of life best accomplishes, or would have accomplished, Clovis and Gertie's mutual goal of a good life for their family - Gertie's life on the farm or Clovis' life in the city. Include an examination of what constitutes a "good" life - family closeness? Working together towards a common purpose? Possessions? Lots of money? A large community? Isolation?

Is *The Dollmaker* a negative commentary on the destructive power of consumerism, or is it a positive celebration of human resourcefulness and determination? Does it take a negative view of the so-called American Dream, or a positive one?

Discuss whether Gertie is a positive or negative female role model. Is her acceptance of the role of breadwinner an example of female empowerment, and is her freeing herself from the spiritual domination of the block of cherry wood a kind of triumph or victory? Or, is her story an example of how strong willed women are forced to become submissive to the wills of their husbands, and to the beliefs of male-dominated society about the way they should live and or behave.

Discuss how the various attitudes towards money and city life held by Gertie's four oldest children (Clytie, Reuben, Enoch, and Cassie) embody and dramatize tensions inherent in the novel's themes.

Discuss the role that Cassie's death plays in the eventual outcome of the novel - how much is Gertie's eventual destruction of the block of wood, which can be seen as a representation of a loss of faith, triggered by Cassie's death and her (Gertie's) self-perceived failure to prevent it?

Consider Gertie's dream of creating a good life for her family, and its transformation from a dream of life in the country to the (perhaps imposed) dream of life in the city. Examine both sides of this question - if the manifestation of a dream changes, does the essential nature of the dream itself change?

Examine the various symbolic meanings of Gertie's various carvings - the cherry wood block, Cassie's doll, the doll she carves on the train, the quickly manufactured dolls she makes when Clovis' job ends, the gift carvings she makes for neighbors, and others. Relate those meanings to the various transformations, those of her spirit, and those of her dreams, undergone by Gertie.

Literary Precedents

The Dollmaker is a unique work of art that can best be appreciated if approached on its own terms, even if it presents affinities with several important traditions in American fiction.

Besides utilizing some techniques of the naturalistic novel, *The Dollmaker* has some thematic elements in common with this type of fiction. Arnow, in fact, shares with such naturalistic writers as Frank Norris and Theodore Dreiser a tendency to stress the impact of external forces on individual fates, to present ample sociological observation, and to examine the more depressing aspects of existence. Similarly, because in this novel Arnow explores with admirable skill and effectiveness the literary possibilities of the material provided by her intimate knowledge of Kentucky, *The Dollmaker* may be related to the tradition of American regionalism. Avoiding the comic, melodramatic, sentimental, and sensational stereotypes of poor whites that frequently mar regional fiction about the South, Arnow successfully strives for the breadth of vision typical of regional writing of the kind produced by Hamlin Garland and Ellen Glasgow. In harmony with trends evident in these writers, her depiction of characters from the backwoods and hills of Kentucky presents to a wider audience an authentic and complex feeling for the people and land of a specific area of the United States and at the same time shows how the lives and fates of regional characters are universally relevant.

Finally, for its chronicling of the ways in which less fortunate members of American society are destroyed by the injustices inherent in the dominant social, political, and economic systems of their times, *The Dollmaker* can be read as a novel of social protest. A comparison to John Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath* (1939), which focuses on the plight of a Southern family that leaves the Oklahoma Dust Bowl to seek a new prosperity in California, is particularly apt, even if, unlike Steinbeck, Arnow does not advance a theory about how social injustice can be resolved. Another appropriate comparison is with socially conscious fiction by women writers whose passionate sympathy for the poor and the oppressed is characterized by a special, but not exclusive, concern for the situation of women.

Arnow's powerful depiction of Gertie as a poor woman trying to raise a large family in difficult circumstances, and to maintain a sense of herself as an autonomous human being, clearly links her novel to Edith Kelley's *Weeds* (1923) and Tillie Olsen's *Yonnondio* (1971).



Related Titles

The first two volumes of Arnow's trilogy about southern hill people are *Mountain Path* (1936) and *Hunter's Horn* (1949), both set entirely in rural Kentucky and focusing on the character, beliefs, customs, and struggles of poor whites from this region. Clearly written and competently structured, these novels, like *The Dollmaker*, demonstrate Arnow's ability to express sympathy for her characters while simultaneously maintaining an artistic distance that lets them tell their own stories.

Mountain Path, except for some melodramatic episodes, offers an absorbing and balanced juxtaposition of two ways of life: that of the inhabitants of a remote and backward area of southeastern Kentucky and that of the more refined and educated world from which the protagonist comes. Partly autobiographical in nature, the novel dramatizes the experiences and emotions of Louisa Sheridan, a precocious intellectual forced to leave college and earn her living by teaching in Cal Valley. To her surprise, as Louisa is drawn into the lives of her students and neighbors, she learns to respect their culture and begins to consider settling permanently in their community, even though she continues to feel attracted by her previous life. Her dilemma is resolved when the hill man she has begun to love dies and she returns to the city with sorrow and resignation but certain she will never forget what the hill people have taught her. Undoubtedly, *Mountain Path* represents an important advance over earlier popular fiction about Kentucky which, alternately sentimental and condescending in tone, generally told the story of an outsider who successfully converts stereotypical backwoods Kentuckians from their tendency to waste time feuding and moonshining. In contrast, Arnow's novel, in addition to being a moving portrait of the physically harsh but emotionally rich lives of rural Kentuckians, is a bildungsroman, a novel about growing up in which the young teacher's experiences among mountain folk inspire her admiration for their ways and educate her into a more mature world view.

In *Hunter's Horn*, set along the Cumberland River, Arnow narrates a story of rural Kentuckians during the Depression years. The main plot relates to Nunn Ballew, a poor white farmer who suddenly begins to neglect his land and his family because he is obsessed by the desire to track down and destroy a red fox which has been killing his livestock and luring his hounds to their death. Arnow uses Nunn's obsessive chase of the fox both to dramatize the ritual of the hunt and to investigate the effects on human nature of a maniacal compulsion. Along with this almost mythical plot, the novel develops other narrative strands that reveal the socioeconomic forces shaping the lives of all those who live in Little Smokey Creek country. Chief among these subplots is the one about Nunn's daughter Suse. Possessed of the same kind of pride and self-reliance that were the motivating factors behind her father's resistance to pressure that he cease his compulsive pursuit of the fox, she strongly desires to escape from the poverty and provinciality of her hill community. However, when she reveals that she has become pregnant, Nunn, giving in to social convention, refuses to support her unorthodox determination not to marry her seducer and thereby condemns her to a life of humiliation and servitude in a loveless marriage. Despite occasional lapses into

sentimentality, in Hunter's Horn Arrow skillfully blends together setting, character, and theme and sensitively conveys a sense of complex human and social experience.



Copyright Information

Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults

Editor - Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Library of Congress
Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults

Includes bibliographical references.

Summary: A multi-volume compilation of analytical essays on and study activities for fiction, nonfiction, and biographies written for young adults.

Includes a short biography for the author of each analyzed work.

1. Young adults—Books and reading. 2. Young adult literature—History and criticism. 3.

Young adult literature—Bio-bibliography. 4. Biography—Bio-bibliography.

[1. Literature—History and criticism. 2. Literature—Bio-bibliography]

I. Beetz, Kirk H., 1952

Z1037.A1G85 1994 028.1'62 94-18048 ISBN 0-933833-32-6

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Printed in the United States of America First Printing, November 1994