

The Dog of the South Study Guide

The Dog of the South by Charles Portis

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Contents

The Dog of the South Study Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Plot Summary.....	3
Chapters 1 - 3.....	4
Chapters 4-6.....	6
Chapters 7-9.....	8
Chapters 10-12.....	10
Chapters 13-14.....	12
Chapters 15-16.....	14
Characters.....	16
Objects/Places.....	20
Themes.....	22
Style.....	24
Quotes.....	26
Topics for Discussion.....	28



Plot Summary

Raymond Midge is on a mission. His wife, Norma, has run off with her former husband, Guy Dupree, who has become a political radical. Dupree has jumped bail, following arrest for threatening the President, and has taken not only Norma but Ray's credit cards, car and favorite gun as well. Ray has tracked the couple through the credit card receipts and has begun the trip he can ill afford, in order to retrieve his property. He has tracked the couple through Texas and into Mexico, eventually landing in Belize, where Guy's family has a farm. Following him is Jack Wilkie, a lawyer and bail bondsman who is tracking Guy, in order to bring him back to Little Rock for trial. Over the course of his journey, Ray adds a passenger, Reo Symes, a former doctor who has lost his medical license and engages in questionable and illegal schemes, running from those he has scammed and the U.S. postal authorities. Symes is traveling to Belize to convince his missionary mother to deed over to him an island she owns in Louisiana, for which he has several development plans. During his stay in Belize, Ray encounters a myriad of bizarre individuals, to include a young bellboy/entrepreneur, a deceptive hotel manager, Reo's missionary mother, who runs the Unity Tabernacle, a young American mother drifting with her son, and a used car dealer who has bought and stripped Ray's car. Three trips to the Dupree family farm to retrieve his property are unsuccessful for Ray, as Guy holds him at bay with Ray's own gun. Ray eventually resigns himself to the loss of everything and the failure of the trip itself.

Returning to the Unity Tabernacle, after the final trip to the Dupree farm, Ray's departure is delayed by the news that Mrs. Symes has suffered a stroke and by the arrival of a storm of hurricane proportions. Enlisted to assist with the sandbagging operation, Ray finds Jack Wilkie, who has been serving time in the local jail for threatening to kill a local's monkey. He then heads to the hospital, enlisted again to help with the chaos created by the storm. There, Ray finds wife Norma, who has been hospitalized for several days following an appendectomy. Once Norma is nursed back to health, Jack Wilkie agrees to drive Ray and Norma back home, and this trip is at least pleasant and leisurely. Back home, Ray and Norma settle into their old lives. Ray continues his college studies, supported by his father, and Norma becomes restless again. She visits a friend in Memphis, does not return, and Ray decides not to travel the short distance to retrieve her again.

Usually, a novel takes the reader through a series of events leading to a climax, during which the conflicts are resolved and change has occurred. Not so with *Dog of the South*. Author Portis writes, instead, of the apparent hopelessness of the lives of many people who endure struggles, betrayal, trickery, and random events and yet learn little, so that their lives remain undeveloped and without purpose. Though filled with humor, as one witnesses the ridiculous and bizarre events unfold, *Dog of the South* can best be described as an American tragedy.



Chapters 1 - 3

Chapters 1 - 3 Summary

Chapter 1 opens as Ray Midge is tracking his wife's travels by way of charges appearing on his Texaco and American Express credit cards. Norma has run away with her first husband, Guy Dupree. So far, they have been through Arkansas and Texas and have entered Mexico, in Ray's car no less. In hindsight, Ray has analyzed the signs that Norma was restless and unhappy. She had wanted to move, to dye her hair, to open a jewelry store, and to otherwise change her lifestyle in significant ways. Ray had not listened and had not taken her seriously. Rather, he had been busy with his college courses, having decided to return to school and earn accreditation as a high school math teacher.

The catalyst for the desertion was Guy's legal troubles. He was not a man of few words and fashioned himself a comedian. Many of his jokes, however, were at the expense of others, and he was often physically assaulted as a result. His latest legal troubles involved a series of threatening letters sent to the current President. The Secret Service arrested him, and Ray put up three hundred dollars to secure his bail. Unable to find a good lawyer, Guy decided to jump bail and take off with Norma. The bail bondsman, Jack Wilkie, is also hell bent on finding Jack, and decides that the best method is to encourage Ray to pursue them. Ray has decided to use the savings bonds, left to him by his mother, to finance his trip to Mexico. He packs a few things and begins the pursuit in Guy's old Buick, which was left for him when Guy and Norma took his Ford Torino.

En route to Mexico during Chapter 2, Ray must nurse Guy's car with transmission fluid and oil quite often. He stops in Laredo, Texas, gets a cheap motel room, and proceeds to a restaurant-bar for supper. There, he is met by Jack Wilkie, who has been following Ray, in order to find Guy and prevent the forfeiture of his bond money. Jack suggests that Ray drive with him in his much more comfortable Chrysler Imperial, and Ray accepts. After an evening of drinking, however, and, unable to sleep, Ray decides to strike out on his own and beat Jack to the punch. He crosses the border into Mexico without incident and begins the trek to find Norma and Guy. Soon, Jack is on his tail, but, following a high-speed run, Jack's car breaks down, and Ray is on his own again.

In Chapter 3, Ray continues south, pulling into a campground for the night, taking advantage of a Canadian couple's offer to share dinner. By noon the next day, Ray has arrived in San Miguel de Allende but does not find Norma and Guy at the hotel from which Norma had sent a postcard to her mother. He proceeds to a trailer park, thinking that the couple would be there. He finds instead only two vehicles, one a repainted bus, named "The Dog of the South." Returning to the hotel, Ray has lunch with the owner and then wanders into town, finding some "gringos" who remember Guy's dog that was with them. Beyond that, however, there is no information that will lead Ray to the couple.



Ray has several interesting experiences while in town, including encounters with a number of ex-patriots, to include retired veterans, hippies, alimony dodgers and artists, all friendly and all with a story to tell. By studying a map of Central America, moreover, it finally dawns on Ray that Dupree has taken Norma to his father's farm in British Honduras, also known now as Belize, and he makes plans to travel through Mexico to find them. He also encounters Dr. Reo Symes, owner of "The Dog of the South," who want to hitch a ride with Ray to Belize. It appears that his bus has broken down, and he needs a ride. Ray agrees to take him.

Chapters 1 - 3 Analysis

The first three chapters introduce the reader to both the main character, Ray Midge, and the issue he faces. He has obviously been betrayed by wife Norma who has run off with her former husband, Guy Dupree. What probably strikes the reader most is the unemotional manner in which Ray is treating this crisis. He appears to be more concerned for his car and credit cards, which have been taken by the fleeing couple and are being used as they travel south to Mexico. In hindsight, Ray admits that he has probably not been particularly empathetic with his wife's needs for a fuller more satisfying life, being more focused upon his return to college, in order to pursue a degree in math education. In total, however, he is not emotionally distraught, as one might expect a betrayed spouse to be.

Former husband Guy Dupree is initially portrayed as a man who might be a bit abnormal, particularly when it is disclosed that he has been arrested for writing threatening letters to the President. Both he and Norma are shown to be impulsive, taking to flight for different reasons, however. Norma wants the excitement of travel and the chance for a new life, which perhaps she sees as more glamorous than her one with Ray. Guy, on the other hand, needs to get out of the country in order to avoid a federal trial.

The conflict is presented as two-fold. Obviously, there is man versus man, as Ray pursues Norma and Guy in order to retrieve his property and, perhaps, convince his wife to return home. There is also man versus himself, as Ray engages in some amount of introspection, analyzing why his wife prefers Guy to himself and his failings as a husband. These two conflicts will now be developed and, of course, eventually resolved.



Chapters 4-6

Chapters 4-6 Summary

Chapter four finds Ray in financial difficulty. Because he is unable to get his savings bonds cashed in Mexico, Ray makes a deal with Dr. Symes. He will drive, and Symes will pay all of the expenses. When they get to Belize, Ray will wire home for some money. Reo Symes is an interesting companion for Ray. At first quiet and complaining, he gradually relaxes and tells his story. He no longer practices medicine, perhaps due to a major lawsuit, and has spent the past several years selling a wide variety of strange products. He also picked up money showing veterans how to fake heart attacks and receive a free one-week stay in a VA hospital. His arrest record includes charges of impersonating a soldier and disturbing the peace at a church service, when he was asked to leave the choir. Clearly a racist as well, he complains about the "niggers" in California. Reo's mother lives in Belize, and he is visiting her in an attempt to get her to deed to him some land she owns in Louisiana, specifically a small island. He has several rather strange ideas about what to do with the land, but his mother has nixed them all. Symes's mother originally went to Belize on a church mission trip, moved there after her husband died and eventually opened her own church. It is further disclosed that Symes is attempting to avoid a man named "Ski," who is apparently driving their route as well. "Ski," it turns out, is looking for Symes and former business partner, Leon Vurro, who absconded with Ski's money from a business venture, and Symes has also run from Texas to avoid him.

Through Chapter 5, Ray still nurses Guy's old Buick with transmission fluid and solvents, as he and Symes continue south along the Gulf coast. After several breakdowns and a second flat tire, they reach the southern border of Mexico. Symes, by this time, is clearly ill. He appears delirious and incapable of understanding Ray's plans to get both of them across the border. Because Symes's visa states that he has a car, he can only leave Mexico with that car. Ray puts the ailing man on a small boat to cross the bay to Corozal, in Belize, and drives himself across the border, to the pier where the boat is to dock. Meeting up with the boat, Ray must then carry Symes to his car and head onward.

Upon reaching Belize, in Chapter 6, Ray finds Mrs. Symes's church and residence, dragging Reo inside and explaining that he is sick, not drunk as Mrs. Symes believes. The mother explains that the island she owns (Jeans Island) in Louisiana has been dedicated as a bird sanctuary and she will not give it to Reo, as he will destroy it with whatever development he plans. She further explains some of Reo's past schemes, including a mail fraud which resulted in pursuit by the U.S. postal authorities. As well, he had tried to get her to invest in a restaurant and a singing school. Reo lost his medical license some time ago, because of other schemes and scams. The conversation, among Ray, Mrs. Symes and her assistant, Melba, degenerates into nonsensical topics, and Ray finally departs for the Fair Play Hotel, an inexpensive recommendation from one of the border guards.



Chapters 4-6 Analysis

The bulk of this section is dedicated to the characterization of Reo Symes. Clearly, the former doctor is a loose canon, grabbing onto any money-making scheme he can, unconcerned with the impact that his behaviors have upon others. It appears that he is traveling to visit his mother for one reason only: to gain control of the island she owns in Louisiana, for which he has a myriad of plans. Mrs. Symes is not particularly thrilled with the arrival of her son, and their relationship begins to be developed during the lengthy, and frequently jumbled conversation with Ray. Mrs. Symes, unlike her son, has chosen a life's work of service, especially to the poor, native population of Belize. She sees her son as a selfish, money-grabbing individual, and it is clear that she has no intention of deeding over the property to him. Because her son is ill, however, she takes him in and will allow him to stay until he is well.

Ray continues to remain nonplussed by the events surrounding him, and it is difficult for the reader to gain much of an understanding of his thoughts and emotions. He seems to be an almost objective observer of the events and situations surrounding him, and does not voice opinions regarding the obvious unscrupulous behaviors of Reo Symes. Ray's character is beginning to develop as fatalistic, that is, accepting of events as they occur without attempting to analyze them for meaning or purpose.



Chapters 7-9

Chapters 7-9 Summary

Chapter 7 opens with Ray at the Fair Play Hotel, where he has taken a room and is sending a message to his father to wire two hundred fifty dollars. He is assisted by Webster Spooner, a Negro boy who works for the hotel, as well as for himself in a variety of odd jobs around town. When his father does not respond to his telegram for money, Ray is forced to use some of Reo's money to satisfy Ruth, the manager, who is demanding payment for the room, following three days of lodging. Ray then enlists Spooner to visit the police station and inquire about the location of the Dupree farm. While waiting for the information, Ray returns to Nel Symes's church to see about Reo.

Reo is still ill but well enough to receive his remaining money from Ray and to share his latest plans for Jeans Island, to include a nursing home which he and his mother will run for a tidy profit. Reo further enlists Ray to run some errands, specifically to purchase some personal hygiene items and to fill some prescriptions which Reo has written out on scraps of paper. Surprisingly, Ray is able to get the prescriptions filled. Reo then launches into an analysis of his life, bemoaning the fact that all of his troubles have been rooted in this goal of "cutting corners," using schemes and scams to produce income and associating only with low-life individuals who brought him down to their level. He was given every advantage by his parents but chose the wrong course and ended up a failure. He counsels Ray not to do as he has. Ray listens politely, but is much more concerned with finding Spooner and the location of the Dupree farm.

Ray finds Spooner, as Chapter 8 begins, who produces a map marked with the Dupree farm and another place titled "Dupere Livestock." He sets off to find Norma and Guy, passing a minor Mayan ruins on the way and stopping long enough to chat with the caretakers and eat. Upon reaching the Dupree house, Ray confronts Guy, who has changed his appearance and who looks like he has been recently beaten. He informs Ray that the ford Torino has been sold and that Norma is no longer there. Guy promises to pay everything back as soon as he gets a first crop harvested. His workers have all quit, and he is virtually on his own trying to farm. Further, he refuses to allow Ray into the house, to prove that Norma is indeed gone, and he is holding a shotgun to enforce this refusal. Ray leaves, promising to return, if only to talk with Norma.

During his return to the city, Ray encounters "Popo," a man bringing supplies to Dupree. He informs Popo that Dupree is leaving to go back to the states and wants Popo to keep all of the supplies for himself. Ray takes only a pair of repaired sunglasses and an envelope of Valium tablets, promising to deliver them to Dupree himself.

Chapter 9 includes another unsuccessful attempt to contact Norma. After a fitful night of sleep in his room, Ray sets out very early for Dupree's farm, only to find that Dupree is an early riser as well. Because he has a gun, moreover, Ray decides to camp out in his car across the road, yelling for Norma periodically. Eventually, Dupree parks himself in a



hammock, with his gun and a magazine. Ray then tells him that Popo will not be coming. For proof, he holds up Dupree's sunglasses and crushes his pills into a pile of garbage. All day, both men remain in their positions, a standoff of sorts, although Ray prefers to think of it as his own personal blockade of Dupree's house. Norma never appears, of course.

Returning to town, Ray chooses a bar in a high class hotel, to contemplate his next moves. There, he meets Christine, an artist from Arizona, and her son, Victor. Christine quickly recounts her history: a failed marriage followed by the death of a fiancé, whom she is convinced was murdered by the government because he had witnessed too many alien landings around Flagstaff, Arizona. She needs a bath and Ray takes her to the Unity Tabernacle for that purpose.

Chapters 7-9 Analysis

For all of his faults, it appears that Reo has the ability to look at his life realistically and to accept that his current state is the consequence of his own actions. He remains the same, however, continuing to plot methods for making money by "milking" the elderly this time. While he will not change, he cautions Ray against a similar lifestyle, encouraging him to be a better person than he. Ray does not respond to Reo's warning, perhaps because he sees a vast difference between himself and Reo. This difference may not be truly significant, however, as the reader begins to wonder what Ray has accomplished thus far in his own life.

Guy Dupree is perhaps one of the "low-lives" about which Reo speaks. A political radical and clearly a bit of a societal misfit, Guy is now parked at his family farm, convinced that he will somehow plant, cultivate, and harvest a crop, even though he obviously knows nothing about farming. He has stolen Ray's wife, car, and credit cards, freely admits that he has sold the car, without remorse, and provides an empty promise to pay Ray back once his first crop is harvested. It is obvious to Ray and to the reader that this will never occur. Held at bay by Dupree's shotgun, Ray still does not appear to experience the emotion that most others would. He prefers to gain revenge by sending Popo away and crushing Guy's Valium, promoting the thought that he is probably possesses passive-aggressive personality.



Chapters 10-12

Chapters 10-12 Summary

Chapter 10 is set back at the Tabernacle, where Christine bathes Victor and herself. Meanwhile, a recovered Reo Symes is still attempting to get control of Jeans Island, and Ray is attempting to get a loan from Dr. Symes. Symes, meanwhile, has discovered insurance checks that his mother has never cashed and now intends to cash them and drill for natural gas on the island. While Ray is trying to focus on obtaining a loan, even offering a set of sterling silver he has brought from home as collateral, Reo is off on another mental tangent, this time comprised of recollections of his life, stimulated by a box of mementos he has found. Unable to obtain a loan from either Symes or Melba, Ray resigns himself to selling the old Buick to Leet, a person who has left numerous notes on his windshield, with offers for purchase. He would like to sell the car and use some of the money to take Christine on a date.

"Leet's Motor Ranch" is located on the site of an abandoned ink factory, and Chapter 11 finds Ray here, attempting to sell Dupree's Buick. Ray finds his stripped Torino in the lot. Evidently, the engine had burned up while idling, Leet towed it in, and the air conditioner, tires, radio and hubcaps were sold. This is finally enough to anger Ray, who threatens to go the authorities with his proof of ownership. Leet is not moved. Ray returns to the Tabernacle, bent upon getting some money. As he pulls up, Christine is leaving in a jeep with another man, who, it turns out, is Father Jack from another local church. Mrs. Symes is showing a Tarzan movie to local children, and Christine's son Victor is there. Ray learns that Christine has requested that he watch Victor until she returns. Clearly livid, Ray puts both Victor and Spooner in his car and leaves for the Dupree farm.

In Chapter 12, Ray makes one final attempt to contact Norma. Between running over a dead cow and one of the boys accidentally pushing the gear shift into reverse, the Buick dies. They proceed on foot, the boys asking questions about Dupree and generally pestering Ray, who simply wants quiet. Once they arrive, the plan becomes clear. The boys are to gather rocks to throw at the house, as a diversion, while Ray crosses the road, enters the house and grabs his wife. The rock attack begins, with Ray participating, and soon they are breaking windows. There is no response from Dupree. Eventually, all three fall asleep. Waking at dawn, Ray enters the house to find it empty and containing no evidence of Norma.

Chapters 10-12 Analysis

Ray has finally had enough. Unable to obtain a loan, finding his car stripped and trashed, thwarted in his attempt to date Christine, and now responsible for Victor, he is angry and hell bent upon confronting Guy Dupree and retrieving his wife. His plan, however, involves two young boys creating a diversion and he seems unconcerned that



he is placing them within shooting distance of a man who clearly may not be rational. In his frustration, Ray has become a bit irrational himself. Even when the car dies, he and the boys continue on foot, without thought about the method for returning to the city or getting away from Guy, once Norma is grabbed. Further, Ray has given little consideration to the possibility that Norma will not wish to leave with him. Life for Ray has become random and episodic, moving from one frustrating event to the next, without apparent purpose or design.



Chapters 13-14

Chapters 13-14 Summary

Chapter 13 finds Ray and the boys beginning the trek back to town. When they come upon the Buick, they find it deep in mud and determine that, within hours, it will be submerged. They stop at the Mayan ruin, long enough to eat tortillas and take a short tour. Upon their return to the Tabernacle, Ray discovers that Mrs. Symes has had a stroke, and the doctors say there is no hope. Reo, Melba, and Christine are discussing funeral arrangements and the obituary, but Reo is also anxious to get back to Louisiana. Evidently, Mrs. Symes had a will and left nothing to her son. She had left the Tabernacle to Melba and additional sums or property to others in Belize. The remainder, quite a bit of cash, goes to her great-granddaughter for her music education. Reo receives only a lock box. He informs the others that he will be going to the hospital for a final farewell to his dying mother and then head for the states.

As Chapter 14 opens, a major storm arrives quickly, and Ray makes his way back to his hotel, only to find a stranger in his room. The man insists he has rented the room from Ruth, the manager. Returning to the Tabernacle, he finds part of the roof blown away, and they all go to the Fort George Hotel, a more solid structure. On the way, they are commandeered by the police to participate in a sand-bagging operation. Most of the other involved are prisoners, released to fill and transport the bags. To Ray's surprise, one of the prisoners is Jack Wilkie. Eventually, Jack is able to recount his story. Upon repairing his car, he had continued his pursuit of Guy and obtained the locations of the two farms. He had gone to the wrong farm, where an elderly man and his pet monkey lived. Jack searched the place for Dupree, with no luck. He threatened to kill the monkey if the man was not forthcoming with information about Guy, and was arrested by the local police.

At the storm's end, Jack is released and retrieves his car only to discover that the battery has been stolen. He then returns to the police station and demands restitution. Ray finds the stranger from his hotel room dead and returns to the room for a nap.

Chapters 13-14 Analysis

The storm signals the beginning of the climax to the plot but can also be seen as symbolic of Ray's life to this point. Descriptions of debris flying randomly everywhere and the futile efforts to prevent flooding and destruction with a limited supply of people and vehicles, seem to describe as well the debris in Ray's existence and his apparent willingness to be carried by a storm of events, succumbing to merely reacting rather than launching effective proactive measures based upon some overall goal or plan. He finds a stranger in his hotel room and simply leaves, accepting it as simply another random event; at the storm's end, finding the stranger dead, he returns to his room to take a nap, pushing the debris out of the way as he goes. He has no plan for even the

next day, much less for the decision-making in which he must now engage relative to his own future.



Chapters 15-16

Chapters 15-16 Summary

Chapter 15 brings an unexpected surprise. Ray makes his way through the debris-filled streets, filled with drunks celebrating their survival. Christine, in her Volkswagen van, is attempting to get a stricken Melba to the hospital, and Ray assists. At the crowded emergency room, he and Christine are enlisted to assist with the moving of patients, and, during the course of this activity, Ray finds Norma on a gurney. Apparently, she has been in the hospital for several days, having had her appendix removed, but is obviously still quite ill. Ray remains in her room, forcing her to eat and drink, and by morning she is read to tell Ray about her adventure with Dupree.

Dupree was attempting to connect with two radical photographers, having convinced them that he was a wealthy radical himself, who was writing a treatise about a new social and political order. He continued to promise marriage to Norma, and this was the reason for her continued loyalty as he traveled from one supposed rendezvous point to the next, finally ending in San Miguel. The photographers finally arrived in San Miguel, and the collaboration with Guy did not go well. He insisted that they change major parts of their political reform doctrine, a demand they fully rejected. As well, they discovered that Guy had no money to invest in the cause and so abruptly left. Dupree was devastated. They then left for Belize, where she became ill, eventually to be dropped off at the hospital by Dupree. According to Norma, his behavior had become increasingly strange, and she has not seen him since.

Ray transports Norma to his hotel room and successfully nurses her back to health. Mrs. Symes recovers from her stroke and returns to the tabernacle. Reo cannot be found and is eventually placed on the storm's missing person's list. Christine and son Victor are staying on at the Tabernacle to assist Mrs. Symes and Melba. Ray and Norma are offered a ride home from Jack Wilkie, who has found a used battery for his car. Jack has no desire to continue a pursuit of Dupree, but, rather, simply wants to get his feet back on U.S. soil. The ride home is leisurely but not particularly enjoyable at first, as Ray is still struggling with Norma's betrayal. As the days progress, however, they reconcile somewhat and begin to enjoy the sights and attractions of Mexico as they head north.

Chapter 16 completes the tying up of the few loose ends. Once home, Ray and Norma settle into their former lives. Dupree, they learn, had traveled on foot to Honduras, landing in the capitol city of Tegucigalpa, now living off of money regularly supplied by his parents. His father has paid Jack the bail forfeiture money. Ray completes his B.A. in math but decides to stay in school to pursue graduate work in geology. He and Norma do well for a time, but, eventually, she becomes restless again, visits a friend in Memphis and never returns. This time, Ray does not travel the one hundred thirty miles to find her.



Chapters 15-16 Analysis

The denouement carefully wraps up the lives of all of the characters, except for Reo Symes, who, one suspects, may have been killed in the storm. Ray's willingness to reconcile with his wife is quite believable, given his apparent willingness to accept most of what life throws at him. As well, his decision to remain in school to pursue graduate work in a completely new field, is reasonable, given the personality developed by author Portis. Ray is a young man who casts himself into a myriad of apparently unrelated situations, allowing himself to be carried from one event to the next. One is left to ponder the probability that Ray will never quite "settle in" to a career and normal lifestyle pattern. Norma's second departure is a valid event, as well, given the fact that she had returned to the same life she previously found so distasteful. Ironically, Ray has traveled to a foreign country to retrieve her the first time, only to lose her again to a town only a short distance away. He resigns himself to the irreconcilability of their relationship, and the reader is left realizing that the entire "adventure" to Belize was for naught.



Characters

Ray Midge

Ray is a young man living in Arkansas with wife Norma. He is supported by the charity of his father while he pursues a teaching degree in mathematics. It is his dream to become a high school mathematics teacher. School is put on hold, however, as he launches out to find Norma, who has run away with her former husband. Tracking the couple by the use of his credit cards, Ray travels through Mexico, ending up in British Honduras, now called Belize, following a series of mishaps along the way and the company of Reo Symes. Ray is able to find the family farm of Guy Dupree and assumes that Norma is there, but his attempts to see and speak with her are thwarted by Dupree and his shotgun. Ray experiences a series of frustrating events, culminating in participation in storm control activities and assistance in the local hospital following the same storm. There he finds Norma and nurses her back to health, apparently believing that they can reconcile and return to their former lifestyle. Back home, however, Ray continues his "professional student" role, and Norma once again leaves.

Ray can best be described as a man who seems not to have found his niche. After a short stint at the local newspaper, he has returned to school, bankrolled by his father, to pursue a degree in mathematics. He also seems to be unconcerned that his wife is discontented and ready to leave him, and it is difficult to determine whether he is simply oblivious or unsympathetic. While he is determined to locate his wife in Belize, he does seem more concerned with his car and credit cards than with a reconciliation. Ray's response to a long series of random and episodic events is rather passive, and, even after he returns with Norma to the states, is not willing to alter behaviors in order to improve their relationship. As well, he continues in school beyond his Bachelor's degree, perhaps out of fear of the real world of work and productivity. In this respect, Ray is a tragic figure who accepts what befalls him and continues to struggle with any meaning or purpose to life.

Reo Symes

A discredited doctor, Symes has spent most of his life engaged in schemes and scams which have resulted in the loss of his medical license and pursuit by both U.S. postal authorities and individuals from whom he has apparently stolen. He is on his way to Belize to visit his mother, hoping to convince her to deed a small island in Louisiana to him, so that he may develop something on it that will generate income for himself. Throughout his life, it is apparent that he pursues any avenue to find money, regardless of the impact his activities might have on others. His mother is completely aware of his antics and is refusing to deed the island, claiming that it is dedicated as a bird sanctuary. Reo spends his days in his mother's church, attempting to convince her that his plans for the island are solid. When his mother suffers a stroke, and it becomes clear that he is not to inherit, Reo plans a quick exit from Belize, probably to return to



Louisiana and lay claim to the island. He leaves the church in the midst of a storm, supposedly to bid a last farewell to his mother and then to leave. Reo is never heard from again.

Reo is a quintessential con man, looking for the easy way to wealth, rather than to pursue legal and slower methods to generation of income. In many ways, he is like Ray, for he flounders through life, without apparent purpose or goal. The difference between the two men, however, is found within their basic values. While Ray appears to hold principles of honesty and integrity, Reo has neither.

Guy Dupree

Guy was the first husband of Norma Ridge, and has now re-entered her life and taken her with him to avoid prosecution for having sent threatening letters to the President. He is a political radical of sorts, spending his time in the development of treatises on a new social and political order he sees as beneficial to America. The son of wealthy parents, Guy has never been forced to truly engage in productive activity, except for a short stint at the local newspaper. Once he is charged with federal crimes, moreover, he jumps bail, convincing Norma to go with him to Belize and live on the family farm located there. Once there, however, Guy's lack of skill in farming and his personality have resulted in all of the hired help leaving and his untenable position as the owner of property he cannot develop. Guy's additional problem, moreover, is his drug addiction, evidenced by his use of Valium and, ultimately, his life in Tegucigalpa, supported by parents with deep pockets. Guy is yet another character, without purpose or productivity, who flounders through life, looking for the easiest way to exist and procure his drugs. His political views notwithstanding, Guy is a superficial, unprincipled individual whose selfish needs reign supreme in his life.

Webster Spooner

Webster is a youngster in Belize who must fend for himself. To survive, he is an assistant/bellboy at the Fair Play Hotel, but, as well, engages in any money-making activity available in order to obtain cash. Webster is enlisted by Ray to navigate the local system, in order to gain the location of Dupree's farm and to act as a liaison between Midge and the locale. Webster accompanies Ray to the Dupree farm, engaging in rock throwing at the house, breaking windows. He is receiving no pay for these activities, but, eventually, Ray gives to him the silver service of his mother that he has brought with him. Webster is typical of many children in Latin American countries who must fend for themselves in a country that does not have strict laws regarding school attendance and child labor. He is street smart and wily, completely able to care for himself.



Jack wilkie

Jack is a lawyer who makes most of his money through the side activity as a bail bondsman. He has provided the bond for Guy Dupree, arrested for sending threatening letters to the President. When Guy jumps bail and runs off to Mexico and then Belize, Jack is determined to find him and bring him back to face justice, as well as to recoup the bond forfeiture. Jack follows Ray into Mexico, realizing that Ray has a better idea of where Ray is, but car failure requires that he stop. Eventually, Jack makes it to Belize but is arrested and placed in the local jail. He and Ray re-connect during the storm, as both are involved in sand-bagging. Released from jail, Jack eventually offers a ride back to the states to Ray and Norma. Upon his return to Arkansas, Jack is reimbursed for the bail forfeiture by Guy's father.

Nel Symes

A widow who has established herself in Belize, Nel Symes runs the Unity Tabernacle, a church the mission of which it to impact the lives of the children of Belize. Nel is committed to her cause and is able to establish relationships with the local youth through the provision of social services and movies which they love. Nel remains unsympathetic to her son, Reo, as he arrives for a visit, ill and broke, and remains firm in her refusal to deed over to him the island she owns in Louisiana. She knows her son for what he is and will not be swayed. Nel suffers a stroke and, while others have decided that she will die, recovers and returns to her tabernacle to continue her work.

Norma Midge

Wife of Ray, Norma runs away with Guy Dupree, her former husband, as he attempts to avoid prosecution for threatening the President. She accompanies Guy, as he attempts to rendezvous with a couple of politically radical photographers, finally stopping at the Dupree family farm in Belize. There, she becomes ill and eventually lands in the local hospital, to be found by Ray as he is providing assistance following a severe storm. Nursed back to health by Ray, she returns to the states with him. Eventually, Norma's restlessness kicks in once more, and she leaves Ray once again, this time to Memphis. Norma is portrayed as somewhat selfish but, as well, as a woman whose needs are not satisfied in her current marriage.

Christine

Christine is an artist, originally from Arizona, and a widow whose current fiance has died. There is no explanation given for her current placement in Belize, other than she is convinced that her fiance was murdered by the government and that perhaps she fears she may be next. She and her son Victor plant themselves at the Unity Tabernacle and she eventually decides to stay on, to assist Nel and Melba with the tabernacle's



purposes. It is insinuated that she and Father Jack, the pastor of another church, may have a romantic relationship.

Melba

Melba is a local Belizean who assists Nel Symes in the operation of the Unity Tabernacle. Melba is portrayed as a sincere individual who is committed to the work of the tabernacle and the purposes of her boss, Nel Symes.

Ruth

The manager of the Fair Play Hotel, Ruth is portrayed as a bit unscrupulous. She rents a room to Ray but then re-rents the same room to another man, without informing Ray. As well, she takes advantage of Webster, the bellhop and fails to send a wire for Ray, who is attempting to obtain some money from his father.

Leet

Owner of Leet's Motor Ranch, this man purchases cars as cheaply as possible, sells off whatever parts he can, and obviously makes enough to take care of his basic needs. He is unconcerned that he has purchased the stolen Ford Torino from Guy, even when Ray shows him the ownership papers. Leet is a minor figure in the novel but portrays a typical native who makes money in any way he can.

Popo

an errand boy, Popo is enlisted by Guy Dupree to bring supplies and drugs from town to the Dupree farm. Popo is stopped by Ray in the course of a delivery and learns that Guy has left the property and wants Popo to keep all of the supplies for himself.



Objects/Places

Hotel Magador

Hotel in San Miguel de Allende, Mexico, where Norma and Guy stay for a while.

Dog of the South

A repainted bus in which Reo Symes is living, located in a trailer park near San Miguel de Allende.

La Cucaracha

Bar in San Miguel de Allende where Ray Midge meets Reo Symes.

British Honduras

A past name for Belize, a small country on the gulf coast, south of Mexico.

With Wings as Eagles

Book written by John Dix, Reo Symes's hero.

Jeans Island

Name of a small island in Louisiana owned by Nel Symes.

Fair Play Hotel

Hotel in Belize where Ray Midge rents a room.

Unity Tabernacle

Church in Belize, owned by Nel Symes.

Leets Motor Ranch

Used car lot at which Ray finds his stripped Ford Torino.



Fort George Hotel

An upscale hotel in Belize.

Tegucigalpa

Capitol city of Honduras where Guy Dupree eventually resides, supported by his parents.



Themes

Obsessions

All of us, at times, become obsessed with small purposes, goals or activities. On one level, *Dog of the South* can be seen as a tale of obsessions, which individuals cannot discard even long after they have shown to be unproductive and pointless. Ray is obsessed with retrieving his property, so much so that he takes a trip he can ill afford and which will cost him his mother's savings bonds and time off from his college studies. Further, he is willing to take an old, mechanically unsound vehicle, which may or may not actually make the journey.

Reo Symes is obsessed with ill-begotten schemes, convinced that the next one will result in great wealth. Even though every scheme he has devised has been a miserable failure and has resulted in the loss of his medical license and trouble with the authorities, he continues to plot and plan, this time involving the development of the island owned by his mother.

Nel Symes, self-professed missionary, is obsessed with converting children in Belize to Christianity and doggedly continues this work, despite the fact that few souls are actually "saved," the children attending her Biblical sessions only for the purpose of seeing the movie which is to follow. Obsessions can only be productive when the goal is seen as at least somewhat achievable and is, in fact, worthy of pursuit. Thus, a detective may become obsessed with a case until it is solved; a surgeon may become obsessed with perfecting a procedure until it is mastered; a student may be obsessed with a difficult course of study until it is mastered. Obsessions of the characters in this work are relatively purposeless, however, and do not serve to develop the people holding them.

Arrested Development

The term "arrested development" generally applies to those individuals who have not progressed into complete adulthood. A developed person is both educated and principled, as well as able to make decisions and choices based upon appropriate goals, using these goals to guide behaviors and activities. Most of the characters in *Dog of the South* suffer from arrested development, primarily because they have been unable to set appropriate goals and/or to alter goals when those they set are no longer appropriate for a fulfilled existence of satisfaction, productivity, and emotional well-being. Ray is a professional student, changing his plans and professional goals whimsically, perhaps so that he can postpone actual productivity through work. Impulsively, he pursues Norma and Guy, in what becomes an unsuccessful attempt to retrieve his property.



Upon returning home, he doesn't change his behavior and, therefore, his life remains the same. Guy Dupree is much like Ray, in that he fails to settle into appropriate adult productivity, preferring instead to become a political radical, designing a new order through a book which will never be completed. He travels to the family farm, convinced that he alone, with no experience in agriculture, can cultivate and harvest a crop. Eventually, he lands in Honduras, where he remains an adolescent, supported by his parents, drifting through life. Reo Symes had been given every advantage by his parents, even a medical school education. Through his immature and impulsive behavior, however, Symes has lost his medical license and continues to rely on schemes, skirting and avoiding the law. In the end, it is quite possible that Symes has lost his life in the storm. Even Nel Symes is not shown to be a fully developed adult. She has settled in Belize out of a sense of mission, to bring Christianity to the children of that country. She is unable to analyze the lack of her own success, however, and remains stagnant as a result, changing nothing about her approach or methodologies. The "lost souls" portrayed in *Dog of the South* are a microcosm of that segment of the general population that fails to move successfully and productively into adulthood.

Randomness of Life Events

Though exaggerated for maximum effect, author Portis bases his plot upon a series of random, often ridiculous, events which impact the life of Ray Midge in negative ways. The betrayal of his wife, the theft of his property, the chance meeting with Reo Symes, the encounters with an untrustworthy hotel manager, Nel Symes, and a used car shark, as well as the arrival of a hurricane-like storm, are all random events which cannot be foreseen. It is Ray's response to these events that becomes the focus of the author, however, in order to show the lack of maturity and judgment of individuals who are "drifters" in life, who have no overriding principles and guidelines by which they live. Ray's response to being deserted by his wife, for example, is to impulsively launch himself into an ill-conceived trip to retrieve his property. A mature, rational adult would perhaps respond quite differently, specifically, by canceling the credit cards and notifying the authorities, who might have intercepted them before they left the country.

Through one random, episodic event to the next, Ray displays behaviors which are both immature and, in many ways, passive, leaving the reader to wonder what he will ever accomplish in his life. The answer is probably very little, as he seems not to learn from his adventure, nor has he divined any meaning or purpose for his life. Portis appears to be saying that, though random events will always occur, mature individuals respond in mature ways, minimizing the impact of these events on their lives. Immature and undeveloped people, on the other hand, are controlled by the events.



Style

Point of View

First person narration is critical to the impact of *Dog of the South*, for only Ray Midge can tell his bizarre story. From the novel's beginning to its rather anticlimactic ending, Ray recounts his tale of betrayal and attempts to retrieve his car, credit cards and perhaps his wife. Along the way he encounters a host of lost souls, each a tragic figure, and his reactions to and relationships with them are portrayed through his eyes. One of the benefits of first person narration is that the reader is able to gain important insight into the innermost thoughts and feelings of the narrator. Through most of this tale, however, there is an almost deliberate attempt not to reveal strong emotion or feeling.

Occasionally, the reader is allowed to glean bits of contemplation and a few instances of anger, but predominantly, the tale unfolds through conversation among the unique and bizarre characters and events portrayed almost objectively. At times, indeed, Ray seems to be almost without strong emotion or ability to engage in effective introspection, and these absences offer the greatest insight into his personality. Ray reveals himself as a twenty-six year old who has not yet found a purpose or a meaning for his life. He is, like the majority of other characters in the work, an undeveloped adult. Consequently, he allows events to occur and then reacts, often without much emotional response or analysis. When he returns home with Norma, moreover, life changes little, and she ultimately leaves again, this time with no response from Ray, who remains a student. In the end, Ray shows, rather than tells, the reader that not much has changed.

Setting

The tale opens and closes in Little Rock, Arkansas, home of narrator Ray Midge. Ray's wife Norma has run off with Guy Dupree, her former husband, and has taken his car and credit cards with her. He begins a bizarre journey through Texas and Mexico, following the trail of credit card charges, driving on bad roads and through Mexican village to the town of San Miguel de Allende, where Norma and partner Guy Dupree spent several days. Realizing that the couple has obviously gone to the Dupree family farm in British Honduras (now known as Belize), Ray leaves in the old Buick Norma and Guy had left for him, now with passenger Reo Symes. The trip through southern Mexico is not without problems, to include bad roads, ferry crossings, and dangerous night driving, but Ray eventually passes through the southern Mexico border and into Belize. Belize is a typical Central American country with poor infrastructure and a less-than-developed economy. Ray maneuvers himself by enlisting assistance from a local hotel bellhop and manages to locate the Dupree farm in a more rural part of the small country. Garbage, dead animals left on roads, and poor utility resources are typical in this setting, and they are described accurately by author Portis. By the novel's end, Ray and Norma return to the States, with leisurely travel and a picture of more tourist-



friendly hotels and restaurants of Mexico. The trip ends back in Little Rock where Ray and Norma attempt a return to their former lives.

Language and Meaning

Ray Midge is a college student and former employee of a local newspaper. As such, his use of language must be relatively sophisticated, if the story is to have credibility. Because the other major characters are educated as well, they also must use appropriate English and do so throughout the work. The language alters markedly for characters who are of Mexican and Central American descent, however, as their English must necessarily be basic and somewhat grammatically challenged. There is very little technical or professional language required, except for the lengthy musings of Reo Symes when he speaks of medical conditions and medications. Spiritual discussion held with Nel Symes and comments by her proteges certainly have a more Biblical flavor. Overall, the language is typical of middle-class white Americans, which, indeed the majority of characters are. Language and dialect shift as necessary for the purpose of lending credibility to other character portrayals.

Structure

Dog of the South is divided into three distinct sections, of varying lengths. Section one, the first five chapters, introduces the reader to the issue faced by Ray Midge and his travel in pursuit of Norma and Guy, a trip that takes him first to San Miguel Allende in Mexico and then to the small country of Belize (formerly British Honduras), just south of Mexico. In this section, the reader learns the background of Ray and Norma's marriage, the history of Guy Dupree, and is introduced to the character of Reo Symes, a man who enters Ray's life in San Miguel de Allende and becomes a major character for the remainder of the story.

The second section, Chapters 6 - 13, is the lengthy "meat" of the tale, describing in detail the events of Ray's stay in Belize, including three trips out to the Dupree farm in an attempt to retrieve his property and talk with Norma, the antics and activities at Unity Tabernacle, and Ray's resignation to the loss of both his car and his wife. Chapters 13-16 provide the climax and denouement of the plot, to include the a horrific storm and the eventual location of Norma in the local hospital. The lives of the characters and the return of Ray to a life no different than when the story began provide the anticlimactic ending to a story in which purpose and meaning to life remain unanswered.



Quotes

I drank from the side of the mug that a left-handed person would use, in the belief that fewer mouths had been on that side. That is also my policy with cups, any vessel with a handle, although you can usually count on cups getting a more thorough washing than bar glasses. (Chapter 1, p. 27)

I slept in the car again, although I didn't like it, being exposed that way to people walking by and peering in the windows, watching me sleep. It was like lying supine on the beach with your eyes closed and fearing that some terrible person in heavy shoes will come along and be seized by an impulse to stomp on your vulnerable belly. (Chapter 3, pp. 39-40)

Then after a few minutes it came to me. I knew where Dupree had gone and I should have known all along. He had gone to his father's farm in Central America. (Chapter 3, p. 46)

An American woman wearing a white tennis hat stuck her head in the doorway and then withdrew it in one second when she saw what kind of place it was. The Cucaracha gang got a good laugh out of this, each one accusing the other of being the frightful person who had scared her away. (Chapter 3, p.47)

I wondered at what age that business started, the hair-in-the-ear business...I felt in my ears and found nothing, but I knew the stuff would be sprouting there soon, perhaps in a matter of hours. (Chapter 4, p. 67)

'This religious nature business reminds me of Reo, your man of science. He'll try to tell you that God is out there in the trees and grass somewhere, some kind of force...And Father Jackie is not much better, saying God is a perfect sphere.' (Chapter 6, p.99 - Nel Symes)

The nurse who ran the dispensary was an Englishwoman. She didn't believe those prescriptions for a minute but she sold me the stuff anyway, some heart medicine called Lanoxin, and some Demerol, which I knew to be dope, and some other things in evil little bottles that I suspected of being dope. (Chapter 7, p. 125)

I thought about the happy and decent life of a forest ranger, a fresh tan uniform every morning and a hearty breakfast and a goodbye peck from Norma at the door of our brown cottage in the woods. It was a field well worth looking into. (Chapter 8, p. 143)

I would lay Dupree out in that hammock when I had killed him...I would leave him in the hammock with a candle burning in his mouth and let the Belize detectives make of it what they would. (Chapter 8, pp. 150-151)

I can't say I was really sick, unless you count narcolepsy and mild xenophobia, but I was a little queasy. If there had been a gang of reporters outside clamoring to know my



condition, Webster would have had to announce to them that it was satisfactory. (Chapter 8, p. 155)

The doctor and Webster Spooner and I had all contrived to get ourselves into the power of women and I could see no clear move for any one of us. It was hard to order my thoughts. (Chapter 9, p. 158)

I drove away in the Buick, not deigning to sell it, and I put the whole thing out of my mind, as though Leet had never been cast upon this shore with his fat fingers. I thought instead of Christine and her wet hair and speculated on squeezing her, and more, being married to her, our life together in Vermont. (Chapter 11, pp. 183-84)

He (Jack) talked about eggs and he talked about life. There was altogether too much meanness in the world, he said, and the source of it all was negative thinking. He said I must avoid negative thoughts and all negative things if I wanted my brief stay on earth to be a happy one. (Chapter 14, p. 223)

I was dead on my feet, a zombie, and not at all prepared for the second great surprise of that day. I found Norma. It was there in that place of concentrated misery that I found her at last, and my senses were so dull that I took it as a matter of course. (Chapter 15, p. 229)

Norma regained her health and we got on better than ever before...Then in April, after the last frost, Norma became restless AGAIN. She went to Memphis to visit a friend named Marge...and the next thing I knew she had her own apartment over there, and a job doing something at a television station. (Chapter 16, p. 246)



Topics for Discussion

In what way are the political and social times of the 1960s reflected in the novel. Give specific examples.

Many characters serve their own obsessions in this work. Describe the obsessions of at least three characters.

Has Ray's experience changed him? Why or why not?

Discuss the symbolism of the storm and resulting debris and suffering.

Develop the concept that the bus is symbolic of the lives of the main characters.

In what ways does Ray typify a classic tragic figure in literature? Be specific.

What flaws in character do you find in Reo, Nel, Guy and Norma? Use examples from the story to support your position.