

# **Election: A Novel Study Guide**

## **Election: A Novel by Tom Perrotta**

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## Plot Summary

Set in Winwood, New Jersey, Tom Perrotta's novel "Election" is a story of high school politics and student election drama. Mr. M., a popular history teacher, encourages Paul Warren, a good kid, to run for Student Government Association president against Tracy Flick, a manipulative over-achiever. When Lisa Flanagan decides to be Paul's campaign manager and begins dating him, Paul's sister Tammy (a lesbian who failed to seduce Lisa, her former best friend), decides to run against Paul as well.

Meanwhile, Mr. M. has an affair with the divorced wife, Sherry, of former English teacher Jack Dexter, who himself had an affair with Tracy Flick. The fallout from Dexter's affair resulted in the loss of his job, smashing his car windshield, and returning home to live with his parents. Mr. M.'s affair is revealed to his wife the same day of the election, which Tracy wins. Mr. M., however, rigs the election so that Paul wins.

However, the school janitor, Joe Delvecchio, discovers the ballots Mr. M. threw away, and the real results of the election are revealed. Mr. M. voluntarily quits his job and begins work as a used car salesman, and his wife decides to stay with him. At the end of the next year, Tracy Flick comes to visit Mr. M., seeking at first to humiliate him, and then asks him to sign her yearbook.



# 1

## 1 Summary

Mr. M., a history and social studies teacher who teaches Current Events at Winwood High, explains that all he has ever wanted to do was teach. Yet, he explains, it is difficult to get kids interested in Current Events because they care more about sports, sex, and high school politics such as the Glen Ridge rape case where high school jocks used a baseball bat to sexually assault a retarded girl. Most students defend the jocks and only one student, Paul Warren, disagrees and says the jocks are scum.

Paul Warren is the sort of kid that Mr. M is trying to reach. Paul has woken up to the world around him because of the Current Events class and Mr. M., not only to realize people are dying, but this his own father is having an affair. Paul is a nice kid, a varsity fullback, a National Merit semifinalist, and handsome. He is the perfect candidate for the role of student government president, which is mostly ceremonial in nature. Mr. M. is also also an adviser to the Student Government Association.

Paul is running against Tracy Flick, who confesses to the reader immediately that she slept with her English teacher, Jack Dexter. Tracy intends on a bright future beginning with Georgetown University. When Tracy discovers Paul is running for president, she is enraged and wants to know why. Tracy, who is president of the junior class, treasurer for the SGA, assistant editor at the school paper "Watchdog," and sang in the musical "Oklahoma!" cannot understand why Paul is running. Paul, on the other hand, thinks Tracy is attractive.

Mr. M. reveals his motives for wanting Paul to run. He wants to see Tracy lose because Tracy is manipulative and full of ambition. Mr. M. believes it will be a two-person race between Paul and Tracy, until Paul's sister, Tammy, decides to run.

## 1 Analysis

The stage is set for the course of the book in the first chapter. Readers are introduced to the three main characters, Mr. M., Paul Warren, and Tracy Flick. As a teacher, Mr. M. maintains a position of authority and understanding, being able to tell which students are intelligent, which students are insincere, and which students simply don't care. Mr. M. is presented, at least at first, as something of a moralist who plays devil's advocate by never offering opinions on events, to get his students to think for themselves in class. Paul shines through, declaring that the perpetrators of the Glen Ridge rape case are scum.

Tracy Flick, on the other hand, is presented as insincere. She is driven by ambition and conquest, and nothing else. Mr. M. doesn't like that sort of manipulative narcissism, and so goads Paul Warren into running for Student Government Association president. There is a goodness in Paul that Mr. M. admires, reflective of his own nature, on first



instinct to the reader. The three main characters are presented as diverse and without much in common between them, up until the election rolls around.

The popular saying that high school is the real world writ small is painfully apparent in Winwood High: Mr. M. -already in the first chapter -shows a more duplicitous side to his moral outlook on things by encouraging Paul to run -not just because he thinks Paul would be a good president, but because Mr. M. wants to see Tracy's naked ambition checked. Scheming in real world politics is also very much alive in high school politics.

## 2

### 2 Summary

Paul and his younger sister, Tammy, do not get along. He recounts that Tammy has had a falling out with her best friend, Lisa Flanagan. The two of them had a relationship that no one else knew about, and a relationship that Lisa didn't really want. Lisa tells Paul he would make a great president, and wants to help him in his campaign. The two begin a relationship and Tammy finds out about it. This prompts Tammy to run for president against Paul.

### 2 Analysis

There is an added dimension to the presidential race when Paul's younger (and lesbian) sister, Tammy, decides to enter the fray because Lisa -Tammy's almost-girlfriend -has decided to become Paul's campaign manager. The painful sting of lost love is enough to compel Tammy to run against her brother. One can detect about Tammy a rampant insecurity and self-consciousness; in a way, Tammy has lost an election of the heart to her brother, and now wishes to contest him in the political and social realm. Tammy, though not one of the main three characters, is still a major character, whose disillusionment with her life is going to have a transformative effect on the election in future chapters.



## 3

### 3 Summary

Mr. M. is tasked with reviewing the speeches that candidates give. Tracy's speech is narcissistic, Paul's is idealistic about a school without groups or cliques, and Tammy's is vague and talks about the need for ordinary students. Tammy's speech is also unfinished. Mr. M. approves it, and tells her she needs to finish it by seventh period.

Tracy says Paul is a nice guy in her speech, but then asks the students whether they wanted a tough girl like her, or a nice guy like Paul, fighting for them. Paul is very nervous giving his speech. The audience sarcastically applauds, and then Tammy heads up to give her speech. She says to the audience that it won't make a difference who is elected because nothing will change, and the people might as well vote for her. The audience applauds in genuine fashion, and then Walt Hendricks, the vice-principal, suspends Tammy for three days.

### 3 Analysis

The diversity between the three contenders for the presidency is again apparent: Paul is idealistic, Tracy is narcissistic, and Tammy doesn't care. Indeed, Tammy's apathy is seen by many in the student body as being qualification enough for them to run for president. Yet, despite her brutal realism -saying that nothing will change so it doesn't matter who becomes president -makes a mockery of the school's elections, resulting in a three-day suspension. So far, Tammy is the only one who is truly making any waves in the election.

Beyond high school, each of the three characters can be seen as both voters and candidates: there are the idealists, who believe change can occur, and want to make that change occur; there are the self-servers, who elect and run based on earmarks, special interests, lobbying, and self-aggrandizement; and there are the apathetic voters and candidates, either determined to not participate, ruin the system, or turn the system on its head without the desire to improve things.



## 4

### 4 Summary

Mr. M. reflects on how stable his life was: a good marriage, a good job, and plans to expand his education and perhaps pursue a doctorate. Mr. M. also reveals that does not feel he has tapped his own potential. Mr. M. also explains this his marriage to his wife, Diane, appears dull and lifeless. He reflects on his friendship with Jack Dexter, who begins teaching the same year as Mr. M. Jack's marriage slows down when his wife, Sherry, gets pregnant. Over time, he begins flirting with Tracy while working on the newspaper, who flirts right back. Mr. M. is partially jealous, and partially horrified when Jack reveals his affair with Tracy.

Tracy explains her affair with Jack is exciting, and puts them both in a daze. Tracy sleeps with Jack, being turned off by the experience. Tracy's mother discovers a love note on one of Tracy's papers, written by Jack. The next day, they go to school and tell Mr. Hendricks. When their affair ends, Jack can't handle losing Tracy, and pressures Diane, eight months pregnant, for a divorce. He then moves back in with his parents and helps out at his father's hardware store. Mr. M. sees him a while later, noting that Jack has gained weight and let himself go. Jack resents his entire life has been undone by sleeping with a fifteen year-old girl.

### 4 Analysis

Mr. M.'s character continues to degrade before the reader's eyes. He exhibits no real moral outrage over Jack Dexter's behavior with Tracy, shifting his character from one of moral absolutism to moral ambivalence. Mr. M. is not at first what he appears to be, leading the reader to wonder whether the other characters are as fixed as they seem to be.

Yet, despite Mr. M's lack of moral outrage that Jack should have known better, Tracy reminds the reader that she is just as guilty in what happened. She also hit on Jack, encouraged their relationship, and delighted in its forbidden nature. She does not appear to be harmed in any way from the experience, and uses her mother's discovery of the affair as a convenient way to end the affair.





## 5

### 5 Summary

Lisa continues helping Paul plan and prepare for the campaign. The two of them also have as much sex as they can. Paul leaves for Lisa's, prompting Tammy and Paul's mom to speak with Tammy about her suspension and their family life. She doesn't understand why Tammy is running against Paul. Paul secretly thinks it would be better if Tammy wins the election. Paul also wonders how he ever lived without sex, and when he's having sex, he doesn't even care about being president.

When Tammy returns to school, she sees campaign posters everywhere. Tammy doesn't feel like making any. Mr. M. sees the posters Lisa has created for Paul -done in pastels -of Paul looking heroic and idealistic. Tracy's posters are straight and to the point, and are professionally-done.

### 5 Analysis

Lisa and Paul begin sleeping with each other. Paul secretly wonders whether or not it wouldn't be better if Tammy won the election. Despite Paul's idealistic nature, it turns out that his is something more akin to a pragmatist. His mind is immediately focused on Lisa's body, and the school election as an afterthought. He isn't taking the campaign seriously, because he didn't take it seriously to begin with. Tammy, though she wants to run for president, doesn't exactly appear to want to win: she doesn't have any interest in actually campaigning.



## 6

### 6 Summary

Paul is humiliated by the separation of his parents, and cries because of it. Paul brings Tammy to a party on his way to Lisa's, during which time Paul asks Tammy if she minds if he brings Lisa to brunch the next day. Tammy replies that Paul should do what he wants.

Jason Caputo and Lance Breezy, video game geeks, are having the small gathering to which Tammy goes. Jason's stepsister Dana is also there, and she and Tammy begin talking. They hit it off. Dana attends Immaculate Mary, an all-girls Catholic school. Lance and Jason decide they should all play Spin the Bottle, but Dana calls them pathetic.

Mr. M. and Diane are trying to get pregnant. It is not enjoyable, so Mr. M. takes the advise of a sex expert, and fantasizes about other women. One night, Mr. M. has a fantasy about Tracy Flick. He also fantasizes about Sherry Dexter, whom Mr. M. and Diane visit regularly. Diane always focuses her attention on Sherry's son, Darren; and Mr. M. and Sherry begin flirting. Mr. M. accompanies Sherry to the mall one evening, while Diane babysits. On the way home. Mr. M. half-jokingly asks if he and Sherry should head to a motel. Sherry tells him not to ask her again unless he wants a real answer.

### 6 Analysis

Paul's family life continues to unravel, putting the election even further away from his mind. His own personal tragedies are pushing him closer to Lisa. All is not well at Mr. M.'s house, either: trying to get pregnant has become a chore to him and his wife. Mr. M. begins sexually fantasizing about other women -even going so far as to fantasize about Tracy Flick. Mr. M.'s moral ambivalence is now slowly beginning to slip away: he has become morally neutral.

Tammy, meanwhile, appears to be on a quest of renewal. She admires that her father has begun a new life, and is seeking to start one of her own. This is why she is willing to actually go out after school, and hang out with some people that could loosely be defined as friends. There, she meets the stepsister of one of them, which awakens her mind to future possibilities.



# 7

## 7 Summary

Tracy Flick, for all of her outward arrogance and manipulation, lives a simple life. Her parents are divorced, and her father has remarried and has a son. Tracy's mom supports her and Tracy by working as a legal secretary. Tracy's coming education at Georgetown is depending entirely upon scholarships and loans. Their landlord, Joe Delvecchio, chief of Winwood High School's maintenance crew, has given the Flicks a good price for their apartment rental. Joe is a former cop who, after being injured, took the job of janitor just to do something. At home, the Flicks and Joe Delvecchio and his wife are friends. At school, Tracy and Joe don't pay much attention to each other.

Tracy tells Joe for the third weekend in a row that she has left her math book in her locker. Joe agrees to bring her to the school, knowing full well that Tracy wants to put up more campaign posters. While Joe heads to his office in the school, Tracy goes around decorating with more posters. The empty school makes her think of Jack Dexter. She reveals to the reader that Jack is still sending her letters. While decorating, Tracy finds one of Paul's posters in a spot she wanted to use for one of hers, and so she tears Paul's poster in half.

Tammy, Paul, their parents, and Lisa, meet up for brunch. It is a tense and awkward meeting. Mr. Warren asks everyone what they think about the election and Mrs. Warren says she swears she had Mr. Warren pegged for a Clinton man. Tammy also reveals she wants to go to Immaculate Mary.

## 7 Analysis

Just as the character assumptions that are made about Paul and Mr. M. are beginning to unravel, so too do the assumptions about Tracy Flick. She is neither rich, nor happy at home. Her mother pushes her to always do better, and everything she has in her life, she has earned. She is still narcissistic, to be sure, but now the added complexity of her background lends the appearance of her narcissism also being earned. Viewed in this light, Tracy seems less narcissistic, though certainly no less manipulative.

Tracy's only real friend so far seems to be Joe Delvecchio, a former cop and current school janitor. He kindly allows Tracy to put up campaign posters on Saturdays, and both of their families are friendly and kind toward one another. Joe recognizes the precarious position that the Flicks are in -based on Tracy's mom's marital status -and he also realizes that Tracy is, deep down, a good person without much support in the world.



## 8

### 8 Summary

Monday morning, Mr. M. and Sherry cross the line and have sex when he runs a John Grisham novel by her house. When Mr. M gets to school, Walt Hendricks demands that Mr. M. find out who is at the bottom of ripping all of Paul's posters down. Hendricks reveals that Lisa believes it is Tracy, but Hendricks suspects it is Paul's sister. Mr. M. calls Tracy out of study hall to speak with her. Tracy denies doing it, but Mr. M. is a little suspicious.

Mr. M. then questions Tammy. Tammy, who is dying to get out of Winwood, falsely confesses to tearing down the posters. Mr. M. suspects Tammy is lying, but brings her to the vice principal anyway. Tammy is suspended for five days and is banned from the election. Later, Hendricks and Mr. M. meet at the Blue Lantern and have beers. Hendricks is tired of having to deal with kids; Mr. M. has recently discovered that Sherry has put a stop to their relationship, and is quietly in pain.

### 8 Analysis

Monday is a turning point for Mr. M. His character's moral rightness has been entirely abandoned, as he crosses the line to sleep with Sherry. Mr. M. is also tasked with tracking down the culprit for the poster destruction -responsibility for which is claimed by Tammy, who harbors ulterior motives. She is determined to go to Catholic school, to be with all girls. Tammy's original characterization as apathetic is now unraveling: she is driven, ambitious, and will do whatever she wants to get what she wants. She has no moral reservations about what she does. She is fully self-serving. Tracy's character, however, viewed in light of Tammy's self-serving ambition, appears more complex. True, Tracy wants to be president -but she also wants to better the school in the process.



## 9

### 9 Summary

Mrs. Warren cannot understand why Tammy would want to get herself expelled from school. Tammy explains to Paul later that night that she wants to begin a new life, to start all over. Mr. M. wonders why Sherry would suddenly stop their affair. He spends the night in his car in Sherry's driveway, waiting for her to come home. She never does. When Mr. M. gets home, he finds a red bag on the front porch with his things in it and a note that tells him not to come inside. When he arrives at school, he sees Tracy and her mother, Barbara, setting up a table full of cupcakes the two of them have baked. It is election day at school. Mr. M. realizes that Tracy smells blood.

### 9 Analysis

Tammy confesses to Paul that she wants to start her life over again. That Tammy is self-serving is given further evidence. Mr. M.'s abandonment of his moral certitude is given even more evidence, and his hypocrisy is readily revealed in the ninth chapter. Mr. M. looked down on Jack Dexter for trying to stay in touch with Tracy Flick; now Mr. M. has become Jack Dexter, waiting around outside Sherry's house and trying to call her. There is also a hint of irony: Dexter cheated on his pregnant wife; Mr. M. has cheated on his wife who is trying to become pregnant. This is especially given the mantra "history always repeats itself", and Mr. M. being a history and social studies teacher.



# 10

## 10 Summary

Mr. Hendricks announces over the loudspeaker that Tammy Warren has withdrawn from the race, making Tracy believe it is a Warren plot against her. Mr. Hendricks gives Mr. M. the job of crossing out Tammy's name on all of the pre-printed ballots. Mr. M. is still reeling from the morning's events, and he has become disillusioned with the election. Tammy, meanwhile, takes advantage of her suspension to go to the business district and try on a school girl uniform.

After voting, Mr. M. is tasked with counting the ballots. 641 votes have been cast, and the counting will be overseen by Larry DiBono, a student election monitor. Mr. Hendricks is also supposed to be present, but he isn't around. Mr. M. tells Larry to begin counting, and then slips out under the pretext of looking for Hendricks. Mr. M. then calls Sherry, who is at his house. Sherry says she can't do it anymore and that Mr. M. took advantage of her.

When he returns to the counting room, Mr. Hendricks has just arrived. Larry says Tracy has won by a single vote. Mr. M. goes over the ballots: a third have been discounted for one reason or another (such as writing in Bart Simpson). In the end, Tracy has indeed won by a single vote: 206 to 205.

Larry lets Tracy know that she has won. While Mr. M. is thinking about what has happened in the election, he sees Tracy in the hall, absolutely happy and joyous. Mr. M. then crumples up two ballots.

## 10 Analysis

Tracy is horrified by Tammy's departure from the race, believing the election is now hopeless. Mr. M. is not in a good frame of mind: his own actions have come back to haunt him, and now he must deal with the ramifications of his affair. It is perhaps Mr. M.'s unbalanced mental and emotional state, and the feeling that things are beyond his control, that he decides to steal the election for Paul. Foolish and rash actions only produce even more foolish and rash actions in turn. This is clearly the case with Mr. M. It is, ironically, Tracy Flick, who has done things legitimately throughout the campaign, that now stands to suffer from Mr. M's duplicity.



# 11

## 11 Summary

Mr. M. calls Hendricks and Larry to his desk, letting them know the count is 205 to 204, and that Paul has won. Hendricks counts the votes, and agrees. But Larry is adamant that two of the ballots are missing. They do a quick search of the room, but find nothing. Eight period rolls around, and there is an assembly to announce the results. Paul, watching Tracy, realizes she is actually unhappy with her life.

Mr. M. then arrives to announce Paul Warren as the winner.

## 11 Analysis

Mr. M. seals Tracy's fate by creating a fraudulent count of the votes. Hendricks corroborates the fraudulent number, unaware that anything has gone wrong. Larry, who has a crush on Tracy, and is himself something of a narcissist -he protests in the previous chapter when he is left alone to count ballots -proceeds to continue to question the recount, knowing that he was not wrong when he counted.

A further level of emotional complexity evolves about both Paul and Tracy in the eleventh chapter: Paul has enough observational understanding to discover that Tracy, election aside, is unhappy. Her life is not one of happiness, but one of expectations and achievement.



# 12

## 12 Summary

Mr. M. goes to his classroom after the speeches, where Paul and Lisa come to say hello and thank him. Paul then gives Mr. M. a hug, and they head out. Mr. M. knows he needs to destroy the two ballots, but he falls asleep against his desk. Hendricks wakes him up, and wants to take him out for a beer.

Joe Delvecchio recounts how he discovers the two crumpled-up ballots when emptying the trash, and saves them. When he gets home, he sees Larry and Tracy sitting outside, looking unhappy. They explain what happened during the election, and Delvecchio shows them the ballots.

Mr. M. goes home that night, and Diane lets him in. She prepares dinner for him and asks about the day. She says she doesn't want to talk about everything that happened the day before.

## 12 Analysis

Just as it appears that Diane and Mr. M. may have the hope or chance of a reconciliation, Mr. M. appears fated. Joe Delvecchio, while performing his routine duties, comes across the ballots that Mr. M. eliminated from the tally. Justice is beginning to appear at every turn, and all of Mr. M's choices are coming back to haunt him.





# 13

## 13 Summary

The next morning, Mr. M. is called to Mr. Hendrick's office. Tracy and her mother, Joe, and Larry are all there. Mr. Hendricks demands an explanation.

Paul is told he did not win, and Tracy is officially declared the winner. Yet the victory is hollow. She says she will forever remember being a loser. Mr. M., meanwhile, tenders his resignation. Tammy returns to school wearing a uniform until she gets suspended for insulting religious people. Finally her mother agrees to let her attend Catholic school.

The news media picks up the election story at school, but it is soon overpowered by the Los Angeles riots.

## 13 Analysis

The ceiling crashes down on Mr. M.: his plot is uncovered, and he resigns in disgrace. The election appears to be his greatest defeat, for his identity as teacher has been destroyed by his own hand. Tammy also appears to finally get what she wants, which is the chance to attend Catholic school. The election proves to be a victory for Tammy in regards other than elective politics.

# 14

## 14 Summary

Lisa and Paul break up a month later. Lisa is absorbed through the summer by the national election and political analysis. She works at Carvel over the summer, and one night, Mr. M. comes in. He is now selling used cars, and looks tired and old. She asks him what he thinks of George Will, and wonders why he doesn't run for office. Mr. M. explains that Will is a pundit, and an intellectual. They do horribly running for office, and he suggests she read about Adlai Stevenson, who like Will, was a pundit. Stevenson lost to Eisenhower. Mr. M. apologizes to Lisa about the election, but Lisa says it doesn't matter anymore.

The job that Mr. M. has taken is from a former student, Frank Griffin Jr., who works with his father's car dealership. He took it out of desperation, in order to make ends meet. Diane is pregnant.

Tammy, meanwhile, resents Catholic school. She finds it boring and making a statement in a uniform isn't too exciting when everyone else wears them.

## 14 Analysis

The stereotype of high school student stars turning into used car salesmen is true of Mr. M., who is forced to work at such a place. Mr. M.'s duplicity and hypocrisy have destroyed his one true love -teaching. Lisa's character has also come undone: what was once construed as genuine interest in Paul's election now appears to be simply interest in politics, with politics being invaluable and the candidate (Paul) being expendable. The election brought the two of them together, and Paul's defeat also means the end of the relationship he has had with Lisa.



# 15

## 15 Summary

Tracy Flick drives over to see Mr. M. at work. She reflects on whether or not she really let the high school experience slip by without ever having it. She realizes she has no close friends, and has no really fond memories from school.

Mr. M. is shocked to see her. Tracy has been preparing for the visit for the past year, though everything that made her originally angry at Mr. M. -the election -doesn't seem important anymore. She test drives a car with Mr. M., going to Winwood High School. Mr. M. is unsure about the trip, worried that Tracy might care if someone sees them together. Tracy doesn't care. She runs into the school and returns with her yearbook, asking Mr. M. to sign it, which he decides to do. She asks him if he thinks she is ready for college, and he says that she has been ready for three years.

## 15 Analysis

One year later, Tracy goes to see Mr. M., bent on humiliating him or castigating him in some form; however, she ends up having a heart-to-heart talk with him about whether or not Mr. M. thinks she is ready for college.

Tracy and Mr. M. prove to be diametric characters as well: Tracy's time in high school was spent aiming at achieving more. In the end, she feels empty as though she has not had any high school experience. Mr. M., who assumes the mantle of the consummate former high school star (in his case, he was a popular teacher), was not an over-achiever, relatively enjoyed parts of his life, and now works at a car dealership. While Mr. M. appears to be headed for some measure of happiness, Tracy does not.



# Characters

## Mr. M/Jim McAllister

A teacher of history and social studies at Winwood High School, Mr. M. is a popular and engaging person. He is one of the three main characters in the novel. He appears at first as a morally-absolute character, telling the reader he prefers to play devil's advocate in order to get his students to think for themselves, or to get them interested in anything at all. As time goes on, readers discover that little actually separates Mr. M. from the students around him. He is self-serving and conniving, seeking to put Tracy Flick in her place, going all the way to rigging the election; and he cheats on his wife with a woman (Sherry Dexter) whose husband has cheated on her. His morality is further called into question by goading Paul Warren into running against Tracy Flick, and when he refusing to cease his friendship with Jack Dexter, whom had an affair with Tracy Flick.

By the end of the novel, Mr. M.'s duplicity is discovered by both his wife, Diane, and the school. He voluntarily resigns in absolute disgrace. He goes to work for the father of a former student at a used car dealership, and his relationship with his wife appears to be in amends. Tracy Flick comes to see him one year after the election incident, determined to humiliate him somehow, but ends up asking Mr. M. to sign her yearbook.

## Paul Warren

Paul Warren is a student at Winwood High School, and a candidate for Student Government Association president. Paul is well-liked, a nice guy, a varsity fullback, a National Merit semifinalist, something of an idealist, and handsome. These characters make Paul seem like the perfect candidate for president, according to Mr. M., who prevails upon Paul to run. Paul trusts Mr. M.'s thoughts on the matter, because Mr. M.'s Current Events class has opened Paul's eyes to the world around him. While most high school kids focus only on school and what goes on inside the building, Paul learns there is a whole other world outside and beyond school. In this world, Paul's father is having an affair, and Paul's parents separate.

Lisa Flanagan, the former best friend (and almost girlfriend) of Paul's lesbian sister, Tammy, decides to help Paul run for president. Lisa becomes his campaign manager, and begins sleeping with Paul as well. This enrages Tammy, who decides to run against Paul in the election. When election day rolls around, Paul is declared the winner, but the next day, is told he did not win because the ballots were miscounted. It is a letdown to Paul, who continues on to finish high school, despite the false victory. Soon after the election, Lisa breaks up with him.



## Tracy Flick

Tracy Flick is presented as the principal antagonist in the novel "Election", and is one of the three main characters. Her character initially appears as a manipulative overachiever: she is the president of her junior class, treasurer for the SGA, assistant editor at the school paper "Watchdog," and sang in the musical "Oklahoma!" the year before. She is running for SGA president.

When she was fifteen, she had an affair with Jack Dexter, her English teacher, whose wife was pregnant at the time. Tracy reveled in the rebellious affair, but ultimately chose to end it when her mother found out about it. Mr. M. holds her partially responsible for the demise of Jack Dexter's marriage and teaching career.

Yet as the novel progresses, Tracy's character becomes much more multidimensional. Despite her appearances, she is not rich and lives in a tiny apartment with her divorced mother, Barbara. Tracy has no real friends, except for the janitor at the high school, Joe Delvecchio, who is also the Flicks' landlord. Joe kindly allows Tracy to go into school on Saturdays to put up her campaign posters. It is also revealed that everything the Flicks have, they have earned. Tracy's determination to go to Georgetown would be unthinkable had it not been for Tracy's grades, scholarships, and loans.

When Tracy loses the election, she is heartbroken. When she wins, she doesn't feel vindicated because she is horrified that she has a blood enemy in Mr. M. Tracy is also unhappy with her life. She believes she has missed out on a real high school experience because she has been so determined to succeed and achieve. At the end of the novel, she heads to see Mr. M. at his job as a car salesman, intending to humiliate him somehow. Instead, she asks him to sign her yearbook.

## Tammy Warren

A sophomore at Winwood High School, Tammy Warren is the younger sister of Paul Warren. She is unlike her brother in every respect. She is apathetic, she is not popular, and she is a lesbian. A failed attempt to seduce her best friend, Lisa, breaks Tammy's heart. When Lisa becomes Paul's campaign manager, and begins sleeping with him, Tammy goes over the deep end. She decides to run for president against Paul. She runs on a campaign of pointlessness, telling the students that it doesn't matter who wins, because nothing will change. Her message resonates with the students.

Tammy, despite her parents' separation, admires her father's desire to start over. This inspires her to start over herself. Tammy meets a girl named Dana who attends Immaculate Mary, a Catholic girls' school. Tammy has fantasies about her and Dana attending the school, and is determined to attend. She then falsely claims responsibility for the destruction of her brother's campaign posters, earning herself a five-day suspension and banishment from the presidential race. She uses the time to buy a Catholic school girl uniform, and wears it to Winwood until she is suspended again, and is finally allowed to attend Immaculate Mary.



Yet the school is nothing like she thought it would be, and realizes that there is really no room to rebel: a school uniform at a public school is rebellion, but at a Catholic school, it is nothing special. Ironically, Tammy desires to return to Winwood by the end of the novel.

## **Lisa Flanagan**

Lisa Flanagan is the former best friend of Tammy Warren, and the current girlfriend and presidential campaign manager of Paul Warren. She is kind and affectionate, but her attraction to Paul has more to do with her love of politics than her love of Paul. Indeed, after the election, she breaks up with Paul. Politics are addictive to her, and the election experience compels her to want to study political science in college.

## **Walt Hendricks**

Walt Hendricks is the former shop teacher-turned vice principal at Winwood High School. Once a popular teacher, he has become a hated and maligned administrator. He hates his job and is frequently taking aspirin to cope with headaches brought on by his duties.

## **Jack Dexter**

Jack Dexter is a former English teacher who had an affair with then-fifteen year old student, Tracy Flick. When Tracy ends the relationship because her mother finds out, Jack puts his fist through his own windshield and divorces his eight-month pregnant wife, Sherry. Jack then goes to live at home and works at his father's hardware shop.

## **Joe Delvecchio**

Joe Delvecchio is a former police officer who retired because of a back injury, and who now works as the head of maintenance at Winwood High School. He is also a landlord, and rents an apartment below the normal rate to the Flicks because their families are friends, and because he knows they don't have an easy life. Joe kindly allows Tracy to go to school on Saturdays to put up campaign posters. He appears to be her only friend. Joe also knows how hard Barbara pushes Tracy to succeed, and in so doing, feels bad for her.

While cleaning up the classrooms on election day, Joe finds the missing ballots, and reports them to Walt Hendricks.

## **Dana**

Dana is the stepsister of one of Tammy's video game geek friends. Dana is pretty and attends the all girls' Catholic school, Immaculate Mary. Tammy is instantly attracted to Dana, and wants to attend Catholic School because of Dana. Dana ends up being shallow and boring, which in part crushes Tammy's fantasies of attending Catholic school.

## **Barbara Flick**

Barbara Flick is the mother of Tracy Flick, and supports herself and her daughter on her legal secretary salary. The Flicks are friends with their landlord family, the Delvecchios. Barbara is attentive and caring, but she is also demanding and has high expectations of her daughter, whom she pushes to always succeed.



# Objects/Places

## Winwood High School

Winwood High School is the setting for the majority of the novel "Election" by Tom Perrotta. It is located in suburban New Jersey and it is where Mr. M. teaches, and where Paul Warren, Tammy Warren, Tracy Flick, and Lisa Flanagan attend classes. It is also the site of the SGA election.

## Room 17

Room 17 is located in Winwood High School, and it is the former classroom of Jack Dexter's English class. It is also where he and Tracy Flick begin their affair.

## Auditorium

The auditorium is located at Winwood High School. It is where the presidential candidates give speeches and the election results are announced.

## Griffin's Chevrolet

Griffin's Chevrolet is the used car dealership run by the Griffins, a father and son team. The younger Griffin is a former student of Mr. M.'s who offers him a job which Mr. M. accepts.

## Sherry's House

Sherry's house is where Sherry Dexter lives, and where the McAllisters visit. It is where Mr. M. and Sherry sleep together.

## John Grisham Novel

The John Grisham novel is what Mr. M. wants to drop off at Sherry's house the morning that they sleep together.

## Ballots

Ballots are how the students at Winwood High School vote in the SGA presidential election. 750 ballots are numbered sequentially, given to students to vote, and then deposited into boxes for Mr. M., Mr. Hendricks, and Larry DiBono to count. Two ballots are crumpled up and discarded by Mr. M., causing Tracy Flick to lose the election. The





ballots are later discovered by janitor Joe Delvecchio, causing Mr. M. to resign and Tracy to win the race.

## **Campaign Posters**

Campaign posters are produced by Tracy Flick, and Paul Warren and Tracy Flanagan, for the election. Tracy comes in on Saturdays to put up more posters, and destroys all of Paul's posters. Tammy Warren falsely claims responsibility for the destruction of the posters, securing her a suspension.

## **Cupcakes**

Cupcakes are baked by Tracy Flick and her mother for election day at school to be handed out to students.

## **Speeches**

Speeches are written by each of the three candidates for the presidential election, and read out loud to the student body.



# Themes

## Social Darwinism

Social Darwinism is the major, overarching theme in the novel "Election" by Tom Perrotta. The idea of Social Darwinism -that the fittest survive -is properly applied to the cutthroat world of politics, and perhaps even more so to Winwood High School. Indeed, the first chapter of the novel speaks about the strong taking what they want, and positions the characters of Mr. M. and Tracy Flick against one another in a Social Darwinian tale.

Mr. M., for various reasons, wants to see Tracy Flick taken down a notch. She is an overachiever and had an affair with Jack Dexter, English teacher and friend to Mr. M. Jack loses his job, files for divorce, and goes to live at home because of the affair with Tracy. Tracy is also presented as a manipulative person with unchecked ambition. Mr. M. therefore engages Paul Warren to run for president against Tracy Flick, believing that Paul can beat Tracy. Mr. M. even goes so far as to rig the election for Paul, causing Tracy to lose. It appears as if Mr. M. has come out on top of things, but that triumph doesn't last long.

Tracy, whose character is much more complex and deep than being a manipulative over-achiever, believes that she really has lost the election. She appears helpless in the situation, until Joe Delvecchio discovers the missing ballots. Mr. M. is found out, and resigns from school in disgrace. Tracy has inadvertently come out on top and has managed to survive whereas Mr. M. has not.

## Justice

Justice is a major theme in the novel "Election" by Tom Perrotta. At every turn of the novel, some form of justice manages to prevail over the negative actions and plans of the characters involved. This is especially true of the main characters, Mr. M., and Tracy Flick.

Tracy Flick, who sleeps with her English teacher (knowing he is married, and his wife is pregnant), ends up becoming disgusted by the affair. When Tracy's mother discovers the affair, Tracy has all the reason she needs to break things off. She doesn't regret the affair. She has humiliated Jack Dexter in the process, who quits his job, divorces his wife, and moves back home -and this doesn't make her feel bad, either. A measure of humiliation is afforded Tracy when she mistakenly believes she has won the SGA election, certainly bringing her down a level.

Mr. M.'s duplicity is also met with a measure of justice. Mr. M., who is critical of Jack Dexter's behavior, nevertheless follows the same path. Mr. M. immorally cheats on his wife, and engages in unscrupulous behavior by rigging the SGA election in favor of Paul Warren. Justice prevails when Mr. M.'s scheme is found out, forcing him to resign his



job in humiliation. The loss of his job is a fitting repercussion for having violated the responsibilities of his authority and his position as a teacher.

## Hypocrisy

Hypocrisy is an underlying theme in the novel "Election" by Tom Perrotta. It is manifested solely in the character of Mr. M., whose actions and schemes undermine and betray his role as a teacher.

Mr. M. is formerly friends with Jack Dexter, who is himself a former English teacher. Jack Dexter had an affair with Tracy Flick, cheating on his pregnant wife in the process. When Tracy's mother discovers the affair, Tracy ends it, causing Jack Dexter to go off the deep end. Jack is forced to quit his job, puts his fist through his car's windshield, and divorces his eight-month pregnant wife. He then moves back in with his parents and works for his family's hardware store.

Mr. M. is critical of the affair, and holds both Jack and Tracy responsible. Yet Mr. M identifies more with Jack, because they are the same age, began teaching the same year, and became fast friends. Mr. M. is also presented initially as a principled and moral-driven character, yet his association with Jack and the activities to which Mr. M. commits erode this perception and make plainly apparent Mr. M.'s hypocrisy.

Just as Mr. M. was critical of Jack Dexter's behavior, Mr. M. cheats on his wife with Sherry, Jack's ex-wife. All the while, Mr. M.'s wife, Diane, is trying to get pregnant. Mr. M.'s claims to playing devils advocate (making the reader assume he is a morally upright person) are fallacious.

# Style

## Point of View

Tom Perrotta tells his novel "Election" in the first person, from the perspectives of several different characters who are intrinsic to the plot. Those characters include Mr. M., Tracy Flick, Paul Warren, Tammy Warren, Lisa Flanagan, and Joe Delvecchio (in later chapters). Doing this allows the reader to discover the thoughts, personal motivations, ideas, understanding, and assumptions of each of those characters. Because the characters do not have any major heart-to-heart conversations with one another where they lay out their feelings, telling the novel in multipersonal-first person narration is especially important in order to endear readers to characters. The reader assumes an omniscient role, knowing things about certain characters that other characters do not. This allows the reader the freedom to make a choice about who to like or dislike, rather than a third-person narrator pulling the reader in one direction or another.

## Setting

The setting of the novel "Election" by Tom Perrotta is that of suburban Winwood, New Jersey, a rich community. Apart from its wealth, the town could double for any town in America. The students and people who populate it are not unlike Americans anywhere else in the country. In so doing, the setting of Winwood, New Jersey, is a perfect setting for the plot of the novel.

## Language and Meaning

Tom Perrotta chooses to tell his novel "Election" in simple, straightforward prose that is not unnecessarily poetic or loaded with difficult words. It is a novel told by average people -students and adults- and so there is nothing extraordinary about the language employed. Because the novel is multipersonal in perspective, it is best that Perrotta writes in a simple way, enabling the reader to easily shift back and forth between characters.

## Structure

Tom Perrotta divides his novel "Election" into fifteen chapters, and each chapter is further subdivided into sections. Each section is told from the perspective of one of the major characters. This is done to progress the story and to make sure the reader is aware of each of the character's thoughts about events or circumstances in the plot. It is also emblematic of the multidimensional nature of the characters themselves: each character is complex and not easily sized up. Because of this, it is important to access the thought patterns of these characters during the pivotal events of the novel.



## Quotes

"All right, so I slept with my English teacher and ruined his marriage. Crucify me" (Chapter 1, p. 8).

"Measured against my dreams -which, admittedly, I'd done nothing to implement- my day-to-day life seemed a bit lacking" (Chapter 4, p. 36).

"Jack couldn't handle it. He put his hand through the windshield of his own car and ended up in the emergency room. He told Sherry he wanted a divorce. She was eight months pregnant at the time" (Chapter 4, p. 43).

"A part of me -one I never expressed to anyone -thought it might be better if Tammy won the election. She needed the boost a lot more than I did" (Chapter 5, p. 56).

"Winwood's a rich town, but not everyone who lives here is rich. Since my parents split up six years ago, my mother's supported us on the money she makes as a legal secretary" (Chapter 7, p. 81).

"I didn't really think about it. I just looked down and saw the poster in my hands, ripped into two unequal pieces" (Chapter 7, p. 91).

"A rational person might not have blamed Sherry for putting the brakes on, but I was in no mood to be rational" (Chapter 8, p. 102).

"I didn't feel as happy or as vindicated as I expected to... It's just so creepy to discover that you have a blood enemy, someone who's willing to do just about anything to destroy you" (Chapter 13, p. 159).

"That morning, though, from the moment I entered Walt's office, nothing was clearer to me than the fact that I'd forfeited my rights to call myself a teacher. I had been caught violating the closest thing I knew to a sacred trust" (Chapter 13, p. 161).

"Diane stood by me through the entire ordeal, never once flinching in her support. In a way, I think she was grateful for my humiliation. It sort of evened things out between us" (Chapter 13, p. 168).

"'Tracey,' I said. 'You were ready for college three years ago'" (Chapter 15, p. 200).



## Topics for Discussion

Discuss the presence of and lack of morality in the novel "Election" by Tom Perrotta. Are any of the characters in the novel truly moral? Why? Where does morality exist in the novel?

Discuss the theme of hypocrisy in the novel "Election" by Tom Perrotta. Which of the characters are hypocrites? Why? Why is hypocrisy important to the plot of the novel?

Discuss the theme of justice in the novel "Election" by Tom Perrotta. What is justice? Is real justice ever done in the novel? Why or why not? Where has justice not been served? Why?

The theme of Social Darwinism is on clear display in the novel "Election" by Tom Perrotta. What is Social Darwinism and where does it occur? Why?

There is irony in Mr. M.'s character as a teacher of history, and his friendship with Jack Dexter. What is this irony? Why is it irony?

Despite everything Mr. M. has put Tracy Flick through with the election, she asks him to sign her yearbook at the end of her senior year in high school. Why?