

The Electric Michelangelo Study Guide

The Electric Michelangelo by Sarah Hall

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Plot Summary

The Electric Michelangelo follows the life of Cyril (Cy) Parks from ages 7 to 66. As a boy, Cy carries basins of blood spit up by the consumptives who frequent his widowed mother's resort hotel and he grows fascinated by the revolting liquid. With two best friends, Cy experiences boyhood adventures and adolescent sexual frustrations, gradually forming an adult personality that will limit and frustrate him. As the town celebrates victory in World War I, Cy encounters the man who will alter his fate, Eliot Riley. Riley is a social pariah more because of his drunken, obnoxious, non-conformist behavior than because of his shady occupation of tattooing.

Years pass before Cy and Riley actually meet and in the interim Riley observes the boy's artistic promise and resemblance to the women he evidently secretly loves. One afternoon, Riley confronts Cy with characteristic bluntness and self-importance and offers him an apprenticeship. Having given the trade no thought and having heard only bad things about this tattooist, Cy is unconvinced. Riley gives him until night to think it over, enticing Cy with a preview of his decorated belly. When Cy sees Riley at work and views the full canvas of his body, he is instantly convinced and accepts the position. Cy's mother Freeda convinces herself it is for the best.

The apprenticeship is rocky. Riley is an unorthodox, egotistical, demanding, frustrating and discouraging teacher. Cy remains with him when his mother dies and he stays ten years until Riley commits suicide. Throughout the period, Cy is the old drunkard's nursemaid as well as his lackey. Nevertheless, Cy fully masters the craft, philosophy and psychology of tattooing and becoming a "freehander," an artist skilled enough to work without preliminary sketches. With Riley dead, there is no shadow to live in and Cy strikes out for America to live and work as he wishes under the moniker "The Electric Michelangelo." During the Atlantic passage, Cy understands what Riley has been telling him over the years.

Cy settles in Brooklyn and works at Coney Island, the world's greatest and most corrupting amusement park. He makes friends and prospers, but he is constantly haunted by his mother and Riley. He measures every aspect of life by their measurements. Seven years after his arrival, during which Cy lusts for the shadowy woman in the apartment below him, he finally meets Grace and her horse, Maximus. Grace and Maximus work in the Coney Island circus and she seems to know everything about Cy.

Grace says it is time for change and the change will involve Cy. Grace wants her entire body covered with patterns of black and green eyes and Cy complies, fighting back rising desires for her naked body. Shortly after the work is finished, during which they never consummate their shared passion, Grace is horribly disfigured by a religious zealot who throws acid and ammonia on her. Grace survives as Cy begins to hate everything. Grace enlists Cy and a friend to help her get revenge by gouging out the assailant's eyes. They separate and vanish.



Cy returns to his hometown after the war and reestablishes the tattoo shop. His demons are mostly behind him. On the verge of retirement, a freaky teenage girl, the granddaughter of the first lust of Cy's life, appears in Cy's shop and ingratiates herself to him. She is settling in as his apprentice as the novel ends, with the promise of Cy's passing on the ancient lore.



Part 1, Bloodlights

Part 1, Bloodlights Summary

Seven-year-old Cyril (Cy) Parks wishes his eyes could lie so his troubles would be over. He averts his eyes from sick people coughing into basins to the distant horizon and thoughts of his father, lost years ago at sea. Most visitors to his mother's seaside resort, the Bayview Hotel on Morecambe Bay, suffer from tuberculosis and Reeda Parks can see beyond the horror in ways her son cannot. These guests pay her bills.

One day Cy sees vivid images in the discharge basin and forgets to feel disgusted. Perhaps it is prophecy, or perhaps the devil has painted this little picture. Cy's next confusion comes from secretly watching mother care for sobbing women who visit in the middle of the night. Reeda has a helper who Cy recognizes.

Any trouble in town usually involves Cy and two pals, Jonty Preston and Morris Gibbs. Jonty's mother Muriel is Reeda's secret partner, bringing the implements from "The Surgery," her home office. Muriel is a respected electrotherapist and the boys use her equipment to experience a splendid rush of energy. Cy is too young to put a name on the procedures or to realize abortionists can be jailed. Cy knows only that life can be messy and cruel and he seeks other amusements, like weekly piddling competitions on the beach. The town council frowns on mixed bathing and skimpy outfits and publishes the names of offenders. This offends Reeda, who tells Cy the human body is God-given and nothing to be ashamed of.

Cy's earliest memories are of the laughing summer crowds of summer, filling the town's pavilions. Cy barely remembers the three summers when the kind, well-dressed, close-knit "Ladies of Leeds" visited and joined Reeda in collecting meager alms and votes.

Cy's trio is as enterprising as the adults when it comes to hustling money. Cy, Morris and Jonty pretend to be mythical "boggarts" to con unsuspecting tourists. While playing a boggart, Cy studies cloud formations and recalls his mother's observation that the sun's light does not go out at night but migrates to Ireland and America. Some boys bet on who can outrun the bay's swift tide, but having lost his father to the sea, Cy refuses to participate in this foolhardy game.

One late night the great Taj Mahal Pavilion burns to the ground during a blizzard and the town turns out to watch the dome implode and crash. Coming on Easter eve, the spectacle packs the churches the next day, but the boys prefer to sift through the debris. Cy reflects on his mother's observation that some people take pleasure in violence and how beauty and destruction are often related. Cy observes in people's eyes a strange new glow as they find ways to work through pain. He finds their reactions less predictable than before the war.



Morecambe's quicksand pools regularly claim victims among children and tourists. Older children challenge the quicksand, joining arms to yank the chosen daredevil back to safety. Cy tries it and as he sinks, laughter turns to panic before his pals pull him free. Thereafter, he cannot bear to sleep under tight blankets.

When Aurora Borealis, the "northern bloodlights," appear over the town, Reeda wakes her son to watch the sublime red-green, gentle white exhibition of nature's miraculous grace. It convinces Cy that the first part of his life has ended.

Part 1, Bloodlights Analysis

"Bloodlights" opens in the summer of 1914 and sketches Cyril Parks' life from 7 to 17 in the seaside resort town of his birth. There his mother's Bayview Hotel has carved out a niche market serving victims of tuberculosis. Cy seems more aware than children his age. The title comes from the closing scene, when mother and son watch the enchanting Aurora Borealis. Blood runs through the chapter in the vile basins that Cy carries, Reeda's side job as a midnight abortionist and implicitly on the horrible battlefronts of World War I. The abortion paraphernalia prefigures Cy's tattooing needle and the electroshock equipment will be terribly revisited once Cy is across the Atlantic, a trip his mother seems to foresee in the daily movement of the sun across the sky.



Part 1, The Kaiser and the Queen of Morecambe

Part 1, The Kaiser and the Queen of Morecambe Summary

In school, headmaster Colin Willacy gives prizes to the best finds on combined biology and art field trips to the beach. Cy, who has a knack for drawing, copies a picture of *Pisces vaginales* from a textbook and innocently asks Willacy what "genitalia" means. Marched to the office, Cy expects a birching but instead receives a lecture on sex, a loathsome subject he has no interest in. Cy shares this information with schoolmates and is beaten, as another world opens before his eyes.

Morecambe celebrates the coming armistice with a carnival. A line of Bathing Beauties parades barer than ever and Gaynor Shearer's erect nipples are a distinct favorite of Cy and his friends. When Cy arrives home, eyes glazed and gait obstructed, Reeda assumes he has overeaten. Mother and son serve roast-ox sandwiches to the crowds.

Pedder Street is lined with three-story buildings. Cy and his friends go there to watch an effigy of "Kaiser Bill" burn. Cy climbs a building to hack the villain loose from a flagpole and through the window he hears mechanical bee sounds and voices. Shifting balance, Cy breaks the glass and a man with intense blue eyes grabs him. Letting go, the angry man goes to one window above and slices the rope. The boys flee and Jonty says his dad knows Mr. Riley, an undesirable papist who buys pigs' heads for ungodly purposes. He is a "scraper," whatever that means. At home, Reeda admits she too knows Riley. Scraping means tattooing. Cy's father had a tattoo, like many men of the sea. Cy conceals his feeling of déjà vu and that Riley was expecting him. It is like a preordained rift in time.

Cy has no premonition he will fall in love with Eva Brennan before the 14-year-old beauty arrives on vacation with her parents. Cy tries to find a way to talk to her and aches for her at night. Cy decides he needs help wooing Eva. Morris is uninterested, but Jonty, who has enjoyed a schoolyard kiss or two, is happy to assist. Cy, Jonty and Eva walk the beach, Cy intent on finding shells to remind her to write him. Cy misses the growing flirtations but looks up in time to see Jonty receive the kiss that was to have been his.

The maturing trio of Cy, Jonty and Morris seeks after-school employment. Cy works afternoons in a print shop and earns enough to share money with his mother. The work allows him to perfect his lettering and Cy likes being surrounded by art supplies. Life is smooth, peaceful and easy for Cy, but he knows that an alternate state of being is approaching.



Cy recognizes Riley when cornered as he locks the print shop. Not one for conversation, Riley offers Cy the honor of an apprenticeship. Riley is fiercely protective of his self-proclaimed genius, but he says he might teach Cy a thing or two about tattooing. Riley laughs at Cy's current job. Riley takes Cy on his first visit to a pub. The Dog and Partridge has a sea motif and smells of smoke, hops and chowder. They settle on stools and order two pints. Riley introduces Cy to the bartender, Paddy Broadbent. Riley is both a disturbing and charming presence. Four drinks later, Riley's philosophizing settles on the "scrapers, scratchers and scoundrels" who degrade the tattooing profession. Riley laughs that Cy must not consider him a father figure unless he can bring his fine-legged mother into the equation. Then Riley turns serious. This is business deal, open and shut. Riley wants to pass on his artisanship and genius to someone before he dies. Cy is not sold on the profession and is bothered by Riley's bullying. Riley does not tell Cy that he has been scouting him and admires his imagination and dexterity. Before disappearing, Riley hikes up his shirt to expose an elaborate tattoo. Riley gives Cy until 11 p.m. to decide.

Cy cannot forget Riley's blue eyes or the repeated words, "This is important, boy." Riley is a whirlpool that will surely suck him in. Cy's heart hammers as he knocks on Riley's door. Cy calls out for Riley, who steps through the door. Although still dressed insanely, Riley seems calm, focused and self-assured.

A client grips the arms of his chair, sweating profusely. Half his back is red with irritation, but it bears an ornate cobra. Cy can picture the other side. Cy watches the process of dipping, etching, wiping and talky-talk. Riley motions Cy closer to observe how fine-line hatching tricks the eye into seeing three dimensions. The blood reminds Cy of his basins. The customer rises, wearing art.

Riley removes his clothing to reveal a body tightly dressed in ink. Cy is speechless. Never has he seen a living being camouflaged in art. Riley tells Cy he designed or executed every image he sees. Riley's earlier brash assertion that he can render three dimensions is true.

Reeda is not pleased by the proposal of an apprenticeship. Cy is only 15 and has not completed school. He has a good job. Riley is a drunkard, a Catholic and maybe a Bolshevik. Tattooing is a difficult trade. Reeda then comes around like someone developing a taste for an odd food when nothing else is available, freeing Cy from having to use any of the arguments he has prepared. Reeda demands Cy arrange a meeting with Riley. If that goes well, Cy may enter his new profession.

For the meeting over tea and crumpets, Riley wears his usual costume. Reeda makes herself up like a proper lady and Cy is forced into a shirt and tie. Cy is surprised that Riley and Reeda are on a first-name basis. Cy drifts away from what was never intended as a three-way conversation. Riley and Reeda reach a mutual agreement on all educational and moral questions.

Riley starts Cy's training from scratch, assigning him menial tasks and making him feel like a blundering idiot. Riley is impressed only by Cy's ability to stomach gore. Male and



female customers are bullied into stripping so Riley can view the whole canvas. Cy is in awe of female flesh and is sometimes aroused, but Riley, who prefers working on women, is only occasionally distracted. Riley's teaching methods and lectures inevitably disintegrate into petty opinion, leaving Cy amazed that someone so flaccid and bawdy can be so intricate and precise in his line work.

Alcohol separates Riley into two opposite beings. One is a bard-like, king-like, god-like, intense artist and the other is a loathing, scornful, blackened soul. Alcohol releases demons that revisit every evil Riley has experienced. The demons make him violent, uncompromising, subversive and tasteless, which are the traits that make snobs object that Riley's work is not art at all. Riley's Saturday night binges end in fits of vomiting. Cy sees that Riley can accept horror, sin, evil and lunacy as truth on a par with the love of God and beatific goodness. Riley is the vessel for transferring these matters to his customers' flesh.

Cy wonders whether Riley came to the trade split in two or whether the trade made him this way. Riley dislikes himself and he dislikes other people more. Riley is offended by normalcy and society's norms that try to restrain the devil's half of life. There is a suicidal desperation to Riley. He is notorious in town but glorious when embroidering the human body and his reputation draws customers from across the British Isles. Only Cy knows both halves. Riley and Morecambe Bay are a perfect fit for each other, tidal and schizophrenic.

Cy yearns to begin using the needle, but Riley restrains him. Riley offers none of the lessons promised, preferring to talk about himself, spout opinions and show off. Riley is a freehander, sketching designs without preliminary work and for this charges a higher price. Riley is old school and proud of it, shunning other tattooists' gimmickry. Riley understands the need for rapport and entertainment during procedures and can quickly pinpoint each customer's style and preferences and tailor stories to them. Ink and equipment must be procured surreptitiously, through trusted contacts. Riley takes Cy on a tour of every tattoo artist in Lancaster and Blackpool and sends him window-shopping alone in Morecambe to learn how *not* to do it. Cy finds that by comparison, Riley is the genuine article.

Riley insists the customer section be warm because warm skin accepts color more readily and Cy spends a lot of time fetching driftwood and growing bitter. When Riley finally allows Cy to try his hand, he makes him practice on his own shin, beginning with particularly painful methods used at the time of the Pharaohs. Riley badgers Cy about practicing his patter before the summer crowds arrive, lest he lull them into a coma. Women do not like dullards in bed, either, says Riley with a sour laugh and he offers to apprentice Cy in that area too. Countless times Cy comes close to leaving Riley or smashing him in the face, but watching the brute work on customers always drains Cy's anger and resentment. Reeda advises her son that chores are endless in life and one has just to keep working.

Summer brings Cy only medial tasks and too little income to join Morris and Jonty at the movies. The friends cannot understand Cy's interest in tattooing or his putting up with



Riley's prohibition of hanging his designs in the shop or even tracing stencils on customers in preparation for the master's work. This is what an apprenticeship is supposed to be about. They are stumped by Cy's loyalty to the villain.

When Reeda discovers she has breast cancer and realizes her time as come, she settles her affairs. She studies her tall son over supper, thinking about how much she loves him and knowing she must wean him off her care. Cy refuses to accept her mortality, but surgery cannot save Reeda. She returns to the Bayview to enjoy the motions of the bay and breathe the sea air. Cy wonders about his mother's relationship with Riley when she summons Riley to her bedside. Cy feels dwarfed and discredited by Riley's rude, sentimental and selfish mourning. Cy once again carries and empties basins of waste. Aunt Doris arrives, reads to her sister and dissolves strong pain medication into Reeda's broth against her wishes not to waste her final days. After four months of struggle, Reeda dies.

Reeda leaves it up to Cy whether to live with his aunt or Riley. Halfway to Yorkshire by train, Cy kisses his aunt goodbye and catches the next train back to Morecambe Bay.

Part 1, The Kaiser and the Queen of Morecambe Analysis

"The Kaiser and the Queen of Morecambe" is an odd title. The Kaiser refers to the effigy of German Kaiser Wilhelm II, the hated monarch of England's wartime enemy, strung up outside Riley's building on the eve of the armistice ending World War I. Cy's efforts to cut the effigy loose bring him eye-to-eye with the man who will form him into a tattooist. "Queen of Morecambe" presents difficulties. It obviously refers to Reeda Parks, but her depiction has been anything but regal. She is a plain, hardworking and thrifty woman with an illegal side business and apparently an intimate covert relationship at some point in her life with the lowdown Riley. Her slow, painful death is scarcely regal and even her noble attempts to remain lucid are thwarted.

The mysterious Ladies of Leeds, some sort of social activists, are the key. They arrive for Reeda's wake dressed in old-fashioned finery, which is described as befitting "a royal funeral." That Reeda remained in contact with these women for more than a decade since their last recorded visit to Morecambe is unknown to her son. One of the women tells Cy of his mother's dedication to smashing prejudice in England. March 2, 1913, saw marches for women's suffrage in London and Washington, D.C., the latter well-documented. The lion's share of the chapter is devoted to showing Cy Parks grow into a sexual being and to his frustrating apprenticeship to a profoundly split and troubled personality.



Part 1, Salvaging Renaissance

Part 1, Salvaging Renaissance Summary

Riley's lesson about Michelangelo is predictably offbeat. Riley tells Cy that Michelangelo was born in 1475, died in 1564. Living 89 years wasn't bad back then. Michelangelo was a painter, architect, sculptor and poet, all relevant in the tattooing trade. He had a calling and was his own boss. Not everybody liked his stretchy style. The most important thing to remember about Michelangelo is that he had a hard time getting blue paint to use on special things. Same thing today. The riddle of blue ink must be cracked. There are five colors in the tattooing pallet and a limited archive of symbols. Red, brown, yellow, green and black must capture all of life's joys and sorrows. Blue is unstable and misbehaves when left in the skin.

Riley's upstairs rooms are cold, claustrophobic and disorderly. Cy's room is monastically bare, with an awful feeling about it. Morning and night, Riley's noisy habits torment Cy, while constant, unfair, cruel and tasteless criticism of his work begin infecting Cy's temperament and he shouts and pounds his fists when unhinged. Cy has to struggle to concentrate harder than in school. He misses his mother's kindness and benevolence and he is lonely without her.

For Cy, the first few summers without Reeda feel like an amputation. Tattooing is a precarious vocation and lifestyle and Cy must supplement his income by working odd jobs. Riley has his own methods, only some legal. Cy is Riley's boy, more of an orderly than an associate. The art lessons have no formal structure or chronology. They consist of whatever wisdom Riley feels like sharing, but Cy does master that art is comprised of beauty, malignancy and genius.

Men and boys are drawn to Riley's studio and while his ego needs no hangers-on and he offers visitors no titillation, Riley usually allows them to congregate in his cold, alcohol-free waiting room. At Riley's these people do not feel like maggots in an infected carcass, as they are regarded in the nicer end of town. Some display old tattoos, substandard or self-inflicted. When they can afford it, Riley tidies these up, treats their wounds, adds new designs and lectures them on past errors. Riley is a stickler about payment, but sometimes he accepts barter and exchange.

To symbolize Cy's transition from maternal company to a man's world, Riley tattoos a sailing ship on his chest with his dead father's name strung in the rigging. As a test, Riley completes the tattoo in one long, painful sitting. Riley cannot bear to inscribe Reeda's name on the boy, so Cy uses mirrors to add the name as soon as he feels he can do the job justice.

It is an industry secret that many women get tattoos, usually smaller and more discreet than men's and entirely personal. Women know there is no danger of impropriety from Riley because his equipment is sterile and his hard-drinking habits do not enter his



studio. He is kept supplied with clients, including fashionable women. Cy marvels at women's endurance and unpredictability.

In Riley's studio, Cy graduates sexually to the "real thing." Some customers arrive with loins aflame and offer themselves as a gratuity. Others grow enflamed under the needle. Cy learns to talk these customers out of their pants, but they often take the lead. Cy would like to court some of the customers, but he knows Riley's rules of courtship are to learn to slap, grip, fist and dog-mount them.

Female customers are intriguing, which leaves Cy feeling lost. Riley's "Tenth Commandment" is "thou shalt get used to it." Another of Riley's commandments is "thou shalt not pick thy scab." The other eight vary. Every stage in the passage of life leaves physical mementos. True, tattoos can be briefly upsetting, but eventually they become just part of the anatomy. Watching Riley indelicately impart this wisdom, Cy can only deduce one must let life's events pass by.

One day, as Cy holds the needle, he realizes that ten years have passed. Cy has learned to fight, evict brawlers, negotiate and be enjoyed by women in the back room. He has forgotten exactly how his mother's face looked. Cy cannot remember his first paid commission, but it doesn't matter. People know there are two freehanders working inside as unequal partners, which is rare in this ego-driven business.

Riley has never suggested Cy move on and Cy has never thought to leave, though he has the skills and has frequently been tempted. Cy has learned to love the scent of skin, a key to the customer's personality. To him, the scent is the beginning of art. He has continued Riley's quest for the perfect blue pigment, dedicating one of his legs to the hunt and twice giving himself blood poisoning. It has become an inherited frustration and symbol of what has saved their relationship from wreckage. Every year as the illumination festival approaches, Riley asks Cy with aggressive humor: "They won't be asking us to switch on the lights this year, will they boy? They won't be asking us to put on our ties and dinner jackets and make a speech and throw that switch."

Riley thrives on pessimism and life's conflict and ugliness. He manhandles people, drinks and fights, even as he slows down and grows more pitiful, hair graying, skin wrinkling, but his hand steady as ever. This one talent, this saving grace, is suddenly destroyed when some toughs drag Riley out to Moffat Ravine, wait for him to sober up so he will know what is happening and then deliver five hammer blows that shatter his fingers, leaving Riley unable to use his equipment.

Fortunately, Cy takes up the needle before this happens. Soon after Reeda's death, while Riley is sleeping off a drinking bout, a man asks to have some work done. Tired of being told every time that his promotion nears that he has done something to disqualify himself, Cy accepts and does everything exactly as he has seen Riley do a hundred times. Cy works steadily, enjoying the needle's singing on someone else's body. Unseen, Riley watches the end of the procedure and observes, "About time you started pulling your weight around here, lad." Cy buys a used chair and he and Riley work side-



by-side. Cy advances to freehand images whenever the "alpha male" is absent or more than one customer awaits one.

Cy's routine always begins with the question, "Ready?" It asks endorsement of the change Cy and the client are about to effect, an oral signature that Cy will match in ink on skin. Because some customers take the opportunity to flee, Riley berates Cy to comfort customers instead. Tell a story. Tell a joke. Saying nothing is bad form.

Cy imagines what must have gone through Riley's mind on the night of his assault. Riley must have been acutely aware of everything around him. Perhaps he tried the numbing oriental techniques some clients use under the needle. The slamming of the hammer must have been the purest thing Riley ever felt in life, purer even than electricity. All Cy will ever know is that Riley stumbled in looking like a dead man, holding a mangled hand. Riley then sat in his chair and fell asleep, admitting defeat.

It takes Riley a year to will himself to death by alcohol, depression and starvation. For a third time in his life, Cy is a bloody nursemaid. He cannot cajole Riley into eating or challenge him into speaking. Paddy has cut Riley off, so he steals bottles. Cy has to use distilled water to make his inks because alcohol spirit solutions cannot be safely stored in the cupboard.

Customers still ask for the renowned artist and Cy has to explain that Riley has retired and is resting upstairs. Sometimes this costs Cy a sale. He cannot tell people the terrible reality of Riley's condition. A young man working in the parlor of the greatest tattooist in Northern England who is nowhere to be found suggests treachery.

Riley's last sour joke is to die on April 1. Riley finds and swallows bleach, which dissolves his stomach lining and then comes up with enough blood to mop the floor or paint the sky. Riley makes it home and upstairs so Cy can witness the end. Even though Riley is in great physical and emotional pain, he appears to be free of agony. Riley gives Cy the title to the shop and predicts that Cy will be grand. Riley asks to be buried at sea. Riley tells Cy he has his mother's eyes. Does he realize that? Cy cannot figure out why he is weeping. Is it for his mother or his father or the presence of death in the red room or over being left aboard a ship whose captain has died and no one knows how to sail?

The authorities release Riley's body to Cy, who discovers fitting verses tattooed on Riley's right sole. They wrap the body, charter a fishing boat and dump Riley overboard without ceremony at sunset. Cy remembers his mother's story about the sun visiting Ireland and America, like a lamp for all lost souls to follow. Cy feels fallen, lost and low. Cy and Paddy toast Riley and Cy drinks his first hard liquor.

The next day, Cy locks the studio and takes a train to Liverpool to meet Paddy's acquaintance, who sells him counterfeit papers. Cy uses the last of Reeda's money to buy a third-class ticket to America.

The magnificent *Adriatic* carries almost 3,000 passengers to the promised land. Cy finds more work than he imagined among third-class passengers and sailors. Cy sets up a little station, where customers point out their selections and write out texts to copy in



scripts Cy does not know. Sailors, Cy learned long ago from Riley, are bound by strict codes in selecting tattoos recording their accomplishments and travels. Many old-time sailors visited the old shop, so Cy learns to decipher customers' exotic markings before adding anything new.

The swelling ocean sets the mind free and destroys balance. Luckily, Cy inherited his father's sea legs but falls into weighty thinking about all that formed him and how he has formed. Halfway across the Atlantic, Cy admits Riley was right about everything, about why society sees tattooing as it does and what it means to the wearer and the viewer. Because people dislike each other half the time, do not sympathize and do not want to share, they shoot the messenger, the tattooist, the scapegoat. Cy had not understood Riley before boarding the *Adriatic*, but now he does. The impossible core of their business is bestowing uncompromising communication on the world and bringing forth a person's self. Riley is gone, but his life's picture is finally clear. Tattooing is a siren song and the music of the spheres, impossible to resist or explain.

Part 1, Salvaging Renaissance Analysis

"Salvaging Renaissance" concludes Part 1 of Hall's novel. The title is derived from Riley's quirky art history lessons, a post-mortem guilt offering to Reeda and from the fact that at the end of the chapter Cy understands and embraces the philosophy of human art that Riley tried to impart, albeit by an obnoxious and demeaning methodology. The reader gains insight into the craft of tattooing and its psychology from the point of view of both practitioner and recipient.

Cy becomes a fully sexual being, but he only partially adopts his master's crude attitudes. Women still mystify him and he retains tenderness toward their emotional side. Riley's tragedy and decision to kill himself gradually require Cy to reprise the role of nursemaid that he so hated as a child and embraced as an act of love during Reeda's final weeks of life.

Dealing with Riley's situation, Cy recalls in passing the familiar scene of Socrates' execution by hemlock depicted in Plato's *Apology*. While the theme is not developed, Riley fits the bill as an impious gadfly corrupting the local youth and questioning beauty, if not virtue and goodness. Cy learns Riley's and Socrates', lesson that self-knowledge is all-important. Less familiar is a reference to the English poet Thomas Chatterton (1752-1770), who poisoned himself at the age of 17 and swallowed his shredded poems while dying. Cy wonders whether Riley has been swallowing his needles to speed the process, which would certainly cause more damage than shreds of paper. The final literary reference is the full first quatrain of Lord Byron's famous poem, which Cy finds tattooed on the sole of Riley's foot: "Tyger! Tyger! Burning bright / In the forests of the night, / What immortal hand or eye / Could frame thy fearful symmetry?"

Riley's sketches of famous artists at the beginning of the chapter can be appreciated without knowing the details of their true lives and careers. The most important figure is the Renaissance painter most famous for the Sistine Chapel frescos and sculptor of

David and the *Pieta*, whose name Cy will soon adopt as a professional moniker, "The Electric Michelangelo."



Part 2, Babylon in Brooklyn

Part 2, Babylon in Brooklyn Summary

Coney Island on a drizzly day seems even more garish, pathetic and futile when empty of visitors than on clear, sunny days. Cy has hung out a sign, "The Electric Michelangelo, Freehander, Antiseptic Treatment, Crude Work Removal, No Tattoos under 18 years of age." A neighboring vendor offers Cy bratwurst so it will not go to waste. He wants his fading lucky charm tattoo redone some day and Cy invites him to visit when business is slow. Some tattoo artists do not bother opening on wet days, but Cy knows that this can cost two-thirds of one's business or more.

Sure enough, two men pause to look at the bright walls of Cy's small hut and Cy strides over and launches into his brassy, polished patter. Cy concentrates on Eddie, who seems more serious about a tattoo than his pal Dick. Learning that Eddie is a Dodgers fan, Cy, who has never set foot in Ebbet's Field, begins a convincing spiel to sell a favorite mermaid design. As Eddie grows sulky, Cy turns to Dick, inviting him to heed the siren's call. Talking Eddie into a Dodgers logo, Cy completes the sale and the friends walk away, slapping each other on their sore spots, filled with adrenalin.

Symbols from sports, the religion of the masses, along with hearts and flowers are easily understood, but women and fish intertwined are something entirely different. The association is primal and instinctual. Cy can draw dozens of mermaids in a variety of provocative, sultry, saucy poses. The smell, taste and slipperiness of the territory men worship between a woman's legs are transformed into images as aphrodisiac as oysters. The designs have been perfected over centuries, half woman, half cunt-fish and eternal sex.

In the scramble to escape Pedder Street, Cy takes little more than his 300 designs and continues to avoid fixing himself in place. His apartment in Sheepshead Bay, Brooklyn, an area of music, fishing, banter and bustle, is sparsely furnished. Cy has a little money left and knows he must find work soon. Walks around Brooklyn give him a sense of serendipity.

Cinemas in each corner of Cy's five-story, crumbling, H-shaped brownstone light up the wing walls at night, treating Cy to views of the lives of the strangers around him. He knows his neighbors' names from letters in the foyer mail slots and the smells coming from beneath their doors. He feels homesick passing Number 104, which emits the sweet ripe smell of the moors around Morecambe. He hears faint shuffling sounds inside and a masculine snort and raspy breathing, but Cy does not knock to introduce himself. Life in the Bayview taught him to live without forming relationships with neighbors and his time with Riley left him glad to be alone.

Cy might have adjusted better and exorcised Riley's ghost immediately had he concentrated on all the possibilities New York offered rather than gawking at its



wonders. Cy is certain he will never know the dizzying city as he did Morecambe. The towering glass skyscrapers seem to pull him up through the sky and out into space. New York is the sacred center of all pilgrimages, the big catcher's mitt for every nation's Diaspora, but Cy does not know why he has come. Cy assumes being overwhelmed is something all newcomers feel. As it passes, it weakens his grip on the ordinary, just as Eva had weakened his disposition to love. This first strikes Cy when he sees on the wall opposite his window a magical shadow show coming from an apartment below. It is the profile of a busy woman surrounded by strange filaments. A horse shadow appears and as Cy struggles to convince himself this is an optical illusion, the muzzle moves to eat what must be hay. The lamp then dims, leaving Cy blinking at the possibilities this city holds and laughing like a madman.

Brooklyn has one uncomplicated feature, a purity of light. The city seems to generate the energy of illumination from within. It is magic and distinctive. Brooklynites disagree about when this light is best, whether in glimmering, mournful November or silver-aired, hopeful spring, which is when Cy arrives. Cy enjoys the raucous and rarefied arena of Brooklyn, which light binds together even more than baseball, cooking, or religion.

While buying his first batch of ink, Cy meets Arturas and Claudia Overas. Selecting products with due caution and subterfuge, Cy notices a large Teutonic-looking man watching him and Cy grows self-conscious. At the register, the man tells the cashier to give Cy good prices. Suddenly nervous and not wishing to draw attention to himself, Cy declines, but the hairy giant objects. This is America, so just buy your ink. People here do not care what you do. The man identifies himself as Arturas Overas, the best tattoo artist in New York and he advises Cy to grow big balls or go back home. Suspecting a trap, Cy asks Arturas to mind his own business, pays full price and looks for another way out. There is none.

Arturas' wife sports orange hair and smudged black eyes and wears an oversized dress that reveals tattooing on her wrists and legs. Cy feels Lilliputian beside them, which makes him feel ridiculous. Cy is a grown man who broke up many a scrap in Morecambe and could fight when talking failed. He remembers all the blood he has experienced.

Arturas and his wife Claudia immigrated 15 years ago and traveled extensively with fairs, shows and circuses. Claudia was born with exceptional size and strength and she grew up convinced of her own magnificence so cruelly about her non-female form bounces off her like hail from an ox's rump. Claudia has a kind heart and sturdy mind. Arturas loves her deeply and truly. He was a circus strongman until a knee injury forced him to retire. Doodling on his cast, he decided to try body art and decorated Claudia top-to-toe. They awed crowds in Europe and America. When the circus failed, they settled in Brooklyn, where people of their ilk are welcome. For eight years, Claudia has displayed her form in the Human Picture Gallery while performing feats of strength that enthrall the public.

Arturas' only question is whether Cy is good or "rinky-dink." Cy relates his pedigree and Arturas is certain they were meant to meet. He asks Cy's professional name and Arturas



says his moniker is "Black Baron." Cy wonders how Arturas recognized him as a tattooist and Claudia says Turo is very sensitive man, open to life's joy and pain. Arturas tells Cy that Coney Island attracts a million visitors every summer weekend and there are booths for rent there. It is a tattooist's paradise and can easily accommodate more artists.

Cy soon recognizes Coney Island as Morecambe's American relative, but fatter, richer, better dressed, zanier and given to taking things too far. Both places feature a multitude of interdependent entertainment cells designed to remove a person from the dimension of ordinary life. Both sit by the water and define themselves relative to the sea. The two locales face one another across the vast ocean like gargoyles, one smiling cheerfully, the other laughing maniacally. They share a bawdy sense of humor about the human body.

Cy had not heard of Coney Island before arriving in New York, but he finds it a fulfillment of a prophecy. He secures a booth on Oceanic Walk. He senses that as The Electric Michelangelo he belongs here, but he often wonders what Riley would make of the place. The dead man's ghost can enter Cy's head effortlessly and Riley has eclipsed Reeda as Cy's chief means of reckoning. Cy carries the sorry residue of the Riley's opinions, politics and inappropriate, spitting laughter.

Coney is in decline when Cy arrives, sobering up after its early-century glory. It is still an exciting place, but troubles are on the way. Electrical rides hum perpetually, eliciting screams. Fortune machines spit out messages. Rabid, cacophonous technology exhilarates. Cy can hardly believe the Steeplechase, which dwarfs Morecambe's ghost train. America requires voyeurism in every attraction, because it substitutes emotion for thought. Everything offered at Coney satisfies the devouring eye. Coney reads the stupefying human soul better than the Bible or any other spiritual verse. People naturally want to laugh and loathe, as Riley would say. Coney is like Morecambe grown inconceivably rich and putrid, stripped of all its prudish Tory inhibitions and allowed to ferment, sprout and run amok. The amount of attention given to figuring out how best to titillate blows Cy away here in the nation's purgatory, where prurience and sin are acquitted and suspended.

Would this trump Riley, by removing his role as contrarian and endorser of all things repellent and alluring? Would Riley sulk at having his distinctiveness lost in such a low-level, mediocre place? What is one more drunk on the Bowery, or one more tattooist in parks already filled with electric masters, or one more harlequin soul in this circus, or one more crucified saint or criminal on this overcrowded Calvary?

Coney Island is the largest amusement park on earth and Cy is destined to be one of the cogs in its summer machinery. If Morecambe grew tipsy in the summer season, Coney Island is drunk with vulgarity, surrealism and pure stimulation. Coney Island hypnotizes visitors with their own sensual fantasies and squeamishness, just as Riley could discover things in customers and play on them to make money. Everyone has a specialty and the crowds choose their indelicate pleasure or poison. They come, pay, see and are entertained. British humor is harmless, farcical and uncouth and the



Northerners come to fall down have a laugh or two but suffer no lasting harm. Things there never go too far, but Coney Island, being consumer-driven, offers anything repulsive, breathtaking, or monstrously new that people are willing to pay to see. There is always money available to set up expensive new rides.

After seven years of walking its corridors, Cy has yet to grow accustomed to all he witnesses. Coney Island is proof the Victorian era cannot conjure out the black Gothic soul or suppress its darker energy. Coney Island is proof it cannot tinker without opening Pandora's Box and proof that beneath the varnish of the collapsed Victorian age a ghoulish specter is dancing into the next century. Cy hears that 20,000 light bulbs blow out on Coney Island every day and for Cy the bitter odor of lights popping overshadows perspiration, Nathan's Famous hotdogs, greased runners and sea air as its defining characteristic.

Cy thinks that Coney Island surely is doomed when the management decides to stage the public electrocution of Lulu, the gentle performing elephant that accidentally crushes a man to death. Cy sees the event advertised and attends, without knowing why. He feels sorry for Lulu, who is led into the ring by a stranger. Lulu is about to begin her act when copper coils are placed around her front legs. Because she is a trusting animal, she does not protest. She expects a cheer, but the blasé spectators are busy chewing roasted nuts. Massive voltage makes Lulu's hide smolder and her eyes roll back, but she makes no sound. Cy knows how she feels, remembering Mrs. Preston's electrotherapy headgear. Lulu has no Jonty or Morris to turn off the switch and her death throes are too subtle for the crowd to reverse the gladiatorial thumbs-down. Lulu slumps on her side and her life pops, just another Coney Island bulb. People had hoped she would explode. Coney Island's death is the only greater spectacle possible and Cy watches for the right moment to bow out.

In the first half of the 20th century, every budding tattoo artist worth his salt comes to Coney Island or the Bowery to apprentice, get ideas, or gain notoriety. Tattooists are the poor man's illustrator. Cy's booth is the size of a cupboard. It sits at the base of a bobsled ride and rattles when carriages whoosh past. Cy arrives mid-morning to unboard the booth and display his flash. There is room inside for him, one customer and his equipment. On busier days, customers queue up along the alley, eating hotdogs and shooting targets at adjacent booths. They inevitably push in to watch and Cy has to ask them repeatedly to give him room. He understands they are curious.

Coney Island quiets down in the winter, so every October Cy packs up his flash and moves to the back room of a barbershop in his neighborhood. It is run by Den Jones, a transplanted Southern black. With a kid named Joe, they advertise a \$2 cut/shine/tattoo package. Jonesy plays old-fashioned tunes or Yiddish music, depending on who is sitting in the parlor talking about the ponies, their families and local crime. Cy has no need for the incessant patter and haggling he maintains on Coney Island to distract customers and he knows how to turn it on and off. He listens to Jonesy's stories, but he resists his argument that Cy needs to trim his unkempt locks because his throwback 19th-century look is keeping the ladies away.



The police come by occasionally to make their presence known. The barbershop's mixed-race and cross-religion attract their attention. Officers stride around examining things and once they remove Cy's equipment, claiming it needs a sanitation check. They never return it. Rumors are that New York intends to ban the tattoo trade totally. Cy apologizes to Jonesy for the inconvenience and offers to leave, but Jonesy laughs him off. Cy buys replacement equipment and continues decorating bodies. The cops return, fiddle and stare and some of the younger ones sneak back for 30-minute trips into the underworld and brief freedom from authority. The older cops never come back.

Cy meets Henry Beausang in the barbershop. Beausang too is a Southerner, a fast-talker and a bit of a nuisance, taking up space sleeping in the revolving chairs with no money for haircuts. He and Jonesy were born 15 miles apart in Georgia and in New York they enjoy a friendship unthinkable in the South. Henry works nights as an orderly in a psychiatric hospital. He is small, handsome and quick about the eyes, but he also is a dedicated drunk. One day, Henry's curiosity gets the better of him and he slips through the door unnoticed as Cy concentrates on his work. The customer notices the intruder first and Cy stands full height to confront him. The area is for customers only. The man's smile doubles in size, set in the scarred face of a boxer. Cy suspects narcotics are mixing with alcohol in his system, which could make him dangerous. Cy has not yet learned how to handle American-style confrontations and the man's breast pocket may conceal a weapon.

Cy resumes work and strikes up his patter. The stranger does not want a tattoo. He gathers that Cy is British and declares that with his French descent they are equally and thoroughly bad. The man reeks of alcohol and sweat, which combined with the way he scrutinizes Cy's work sends a shiver through the tattooist. Cy works with a steady hand for ten minutes, expecting a bullet or blade in his kidney. The stranger, however, has fallen asleep on the floor. Cy checks the pocket and finds only a hipflask.

Jonesy looks in to see if the no-good kid is bothering Cy and tells him the kid is Henry Beausang, who begins drinking as soon as he gets off work, then sleeps all day like an alley cat. Cy and Henry become friends and Henry sells him stolen hospital gauze and needles and even "borrows" an unused steam sterilizer to keep Cy's equipment sanitary. In return, Cy becomes Henry's benefactor, giving him money and showing up whenever Henry gets in trouble. Cy views Henry as a younger, benign, redeemable version of Riley.

Carrying Henry back to his own apartment, Cy realizes his new friend is barely out of his teens and he sees that Henry has sustained extensive physical damage. At least Henry is skin-and-bones light and polite in his helplessness. Cy tends him, scolds him and then returns to the annoyed customer whose tattoo is half-finished. Den confides that Henry comes from a wealthy Baptist family, was thrown out of Georgia by his mother after being caught during his wedding reception in an intimate embrace with a male school friend and gets beaten up now for what he is willing to do. In the summer, Henry drops by Coney Island to laugh at the shows and drink in the bars with Cy.



Tattooists stand apart from the tricksters and freaks as somehow genuine and timeless, like scrimshaw displayed alongside plastic novelties. Tattooing is Coney's one culture that never fails to stop audiences in their tracks. Inclusion, involvement and connection are keys to the profession's longevity. Customers customized their "ride" and receive precisely the physical sensation, suffering and beauty they seek. Coney tattooists maintain a tongue-in-cheek rivalry, but there is enough work to support them all. Cy has the advantage of being a freehander, which doubles his fees. Some scrapers advertise by decorating wives, girlfriends, even sisters head-to-toe, or they ally with obese carnival women who they decorate to give their careers a new lease on life.

The Varga Oyster Bar is Cy's favorite hangout. Siamese-twins Mary and Valerie own it. Mary has a soft disposition, while Valerie is intimidating and uninterested in romance. Cy calls them the "Sweet and Sour Sisters." Cy often ends evenings in a very sorry state drinking with his friends and in dreams he wakes up either on Pedder Street realizing America is an epic hallucination or in the Bayview, hearing his mother's assurances that America exists and Cy may see it, but she most likely will not.

Chess is Varga's passion. Participants do not maintain European manners, but play viciously and inconsiderately. Riley would approve of the proletariat rabble bastardizing a game of princes and goddesses. The smoky gaming room fills as deft moves increase audience reactions. Games end more often in arguments or skirmishes than by capitulation or a victory move. The chessboards have been looted from around the world, so no two are alike. Professionals and regional celebrities come to play, but it is local champions who attend regularly and vie for the top spots. Among the carnival workers who play, Grace stands out.

Part 2, Babylon in Brooklyn Analysis

"Babylon in Brooklyn" begins the novel's second part. It shows Cy settling into a stark apartment in the multi-ethnic Sheepshead Bay section of Brooklyn and setting up a tiny booth in Coney Island. He makes a number of colorful and helpful friends and comes to love Brooklyn for its magical light, but he is conflicted by the over-the-top nature of Coney Island. Cy continues to judge life by Riley's standards.

Hall repeatedly examines various ways in which Reeda and Riley maintain a massive influence on Cy as he settles in the New World and the author also begins revisiting minor details of Cy's youth that seemed incidental earlier. Oxen and electric shock therapy are treated in this chapter and more incidents will be brought out later. Religion, heretofore limited to passing remarks (Riley is a non-practicing Catholic in a largely Methodist town), is used in shocking, some might say blasphemous, images such as the crucifixion to intensify the portrait of wayward, excessive Coney Island. Hall is selective in painting a brilliant if troubling picture of the park's operation before World War II, but he provides no systematic description of its constituent parts. While this causes only mild confusion, some readers might want greater clarity. This can be obtained by exploring Hall's two-word reference to how "Gumpertz's cronies" recruited the conjoined twins, noting that Hall avoids "politically correct" language here and in



speaking of "ladies," by reading a short online article about Samuel W. Gumpertz, who ran Dreamland 1904-29 (see www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/coney/peopleevents/pande02.html). Similarly, anyone wishing to understand better the tattooing trade of the 1930s can benefit from tracking down a passing mention of Charlie Wagner, one of the era's best known tattooists who billed himself as the "Michelangelo of Tattooing" (see http://tattooarchive.com/history/wagner_charlie.htm).



Part 2, The Lady of Many Eyes

Part 2, The Lady of Many Eyes Summary

Grace has solemn eyes that are territorial, displaced and dark. They suggest an immigrant past she guards closely. Grace realizes a fine web binds human hearts and like a spider, it tightropes home-to-home and neighborhood-to-neighborhood among various tongues, histories and cultures. Others can follow one's strand and add to the web. Grace's troubles have traveled deep inside her and she slips between identities, preventing anyone from pinning down her origins. She slips on an American heritage like an overcoat to conceal her native dress. She curses, consoles, toasts and blesses anyone of any nationality. She takes to Coney Island like an otter to a river and has worked there for several years before Cy discovers they are neighbors. Grace occupies No. 104 and her doorway smells of the countryside.

When Cy is tipsy, he loves walking through the park at night. At 4 a.m., he comes upon a horse drinking from a fountain. The dark, enormous and unbridled beast is the first real horse he has seen in America. Unafraid, the horse watches Cy approach. Cy asks the horse how it has come to be there and the steed noses his ear, snorts and tugs at Cy's long hair with its mouth. "Oh. He likes you," says a woman, stepping out and stroking the horse's flanks. Obviously the owner, she is plain-dressed and dark-haired. Her eyes are a litany of struggle, strategy and survival. Cy frees his hair. It is her horse, she confides and it must be kept secret from their landlady. People in their building are indiscreet. She figures Cy knows about this.

Cy stares at the woman, uncomprehending. She looks like a lawyer setting a verbal trap for a witness. She breaks the silence, summarizing Cy's existence concisely and disconcertingly, as Cy knows nothing about her. "I'm Grace. This is Maximus." Maximus lives with Grace as her guardian against invaders. There is often no room in the circus stables and Grace does not care for the cruel, stupid treatment animals receive there. Cy's mind clears and he remembers the shadow-box menagerie and the smell outside No. 104. Cy swears he will keep the secret and he inquires whether Grace has a man living in her apartment, perhaps an old man with a chest complaint? No, just Maximus, she tells him. Grace's voice betrays humor and a trace of an accent, a morphing of Slavic, French and Hungarian. She seems to preserve her accent deliberately. Cy runs out of small talk and Grace makes him unsure of himself. She seems to be drawing him toward her like a magnet.

Cy, Grace and the immaculately trained Maximus head home. At the door to their building, Grace ties four hemp potato sacks around Maximus' hoofs to muffle their sound, which the horse accepts compliantly. Maximus enters the apartment while Cy and Grace face one another in the dim hallway. Grace's face is not lovely, but it is earnest and compelling and Cy wonders if he should kiss her and whether he is drunk enough to try. Grace looks like a cook trying to figure out what ingredient her soup still needs. She announces she will come find Cy soon. She needs his help. It is time for a



change. Then, smiling, Grace closes her door. It is nearly dawn. Cy hopes for another shadow performance, but he is too tired to focus. He opens his window, blows a kiss to the brick wall, lies down and falls asleep.

In the morning, the open window leaves Cy's apartment cold. A rapid succession of gritty dreams passed through his clouded brain during the brief sleep. Cy retains an unformed image of a woman he might like to know and possibly touch. She is beautiful, he remembers, like Salome in Riley's old art books, with John the Baptist's severed head beside her on a tray. Grace is clearly clever, willful and honest, which Cy finds arousing. He admires how she can house a horse in her apartment. He likes her very much and he might even love her. Cy shivers in bed. There is potential for loving her. Pairing Grace and love seems preordained, unavoidable and uncontrollable.

Lying in bed with a headache and a dry throat, Cy thinks about how Eva had left him romantically vulnerable. Now Cy realizes he can no longer use Eva's ghost to hold him back. He alone has the power to ruin love for himself and now there is Grace, with her dark eyes and her horse. Cy gets up feeling hollow, anxious and sensing someone is in the room with him. Something on the unseen periphery of his life is knocking timidly. Cy opens the door to let Grace in and thereafter, Grace seems everywhere, but nowhere convenient for talking. Later that day, Cy closes his booth for an hour to watch Grace perform, the first he has gone there since Lulu's demise. Seeing Grace seems a justification for breaking his vow never to return. Grace is strong, lithe and well-constructed, but her face is unrecognizable beneath thick makeup. Mornings and evenings Cy passes her door, but he never finds the nerve to knock. Every night Cy hopes to see Grace silhouetted in light.

Cy watches Grace play chess at Varga, although he is not fond of the game and understands it poorly. He prefers to soak up the bar's atmosphere in silence after prattling with customers all day, but now he watches Grace make it to the final round before losing. Her behavior in victory and defeat unnerves Cy. Like Riley, Grace thrives on conflicts that others avoid. Not wanting to liken her to Riley, Cy puts this out of his mind.

Cy realizes he can quiz chess devotees unobtrusively about Grace's strategy to gain insights into her personality. People say Grace is an eccentric, sentimental player who allows herself to risk going after her opponent's queen to disables the opponent's heaviest weaponry in a tough style of play. All chess players have memories like elephants, but only the fearless and lucky win. Another voice suggests Grace sleeps with a black queen under her pillow. Cy turns to see Claudia offering this winking wisdom. Claudia tells Cy very seriously that Grace is her good friend and asks why Cy is asking about her. Cy shrugs and tells Claudia that Grace lives in his building and seems like an extraordinary person and maybe he wants to learn to play chess. Claudia forgives the lie. Do not let her teach you, Claudia advises and do not listen to what others say. Grace is "just a person who knows about many things."

Only Grace knows the secret that Claudia is obsessed with Coney Island's macabre and tasteless baby incubation exhibition. Cy has passed it but never stepped inside this



show because it brings to mind the undone babies of Morecambe. Whenever Claudia is not working, she pays a dime and lingers in the corridors of the exhibit, watching premature babies dropped off by poor mothers who are hopeful they will grow into healthy, hungry, crying beings. Claudia stands very still, watching for signs of life and brain activity.

Claudia, who trains every other part of her body, cannot control her faulty womb and has suffered six miscarriages. So she watches Coney's little ones, as do dozens of New York's bereaved and grieving mothers, unbeknownst to their husbands, in the weeks after delivering stillborn babies. They pay their dimes, which go toward oxygen, milk and sterile warmth and profit. Some donate breast milk. When babies die, it reassures the mothers that God is even-handed in rescinding souls.

Toward closing time, Claudia slumps against the wall and her body rumbles with such thunderous weeping the she is known to the staff as the "grieving giantess." After five months of this routine, management puts a ceiling on the length of time allocated to a dime. Claudia does not care and she repays every hour and weeps. Grace always knows where to find Claudia and the management admits Grace for free to remove the weeping whale. Grace soothes Claudia's hair and makes her promise not to return. Claudia promises, but she always returns the next week.

Three weeks after meeting at the fountain, Grace visits Cy at his booth. Six or seven young men in uniform are waiting their turn for a tattoo, watching the face of the first man in the chair trying to figure out how it will feel to get the work done. As Cy begins work on the first youth's shoulder, there is a swell of bravado. The boy almost smiles, relieved that the discomfort is manageable. As the needle passes repeatedly over the same patch of skin, however, the boy begins sweating and half grimacing. His muscles quake uncontrollably. Normally not one for sympathy, Cy smokes a cigarette to let the boy recover.

Resuming work, Cy and the soldier hear a voice advising the soldier to think about things that make him fall asleep so he will no longer be in his body. Grace is browsing through a book of flash, touching various skull motifs as though she is testing fruit for ripeness. She looks at Cy as if he is intruding on her conversation with the soldier and resumes. Does he realize that soon he will have to put his mind in a box, bury it and remember where he left it? Otherwise, he will lose it, one way, or another. Practice that now and think of those safe things that make you sleep. Grace is either a bully or a blunt, combative angel.

The other soldiers return noisily to the booth and because this is Coney, they feel no need to be polite. They clown about sex, but Grace just smiles and reminds them they too will be trying to escape pain. Do they understand what it is to fight? Mockingly, they ask to be enlightened and Grace gives graphic testimony about battlefield wounds and how the experience of war will affect them forever, making them beat their wives and molest their daughters and it will torment them into decrepit old age until they finally blow out their brains.



Silence follows, as Grace points a finger at her temple and smiles a terrible broad smile. The bobsled and its screaming riders break the tension. Grace lowers her hand and nods. The soldier being tattooed asks if this "charmer" is Cy's girl. Cy breathes out as though punched in the stomach. Turning from a dripping tap into a kitchen flooder, Grace again reminds Cy of Riley, who could overblow at the flick of a switch and launch into histrionic rages. Cy wonders whether one of the soldiers has touched a nerve in Grace. Could she be an orphan of the Great War?

Cy advises the soldiers to wash their arms down at the beach so no muck will get into their bloodstreams. Return in ten minutes, Cy tells them. Cy is annoyed at the crowd distracting him from Grace and that they bring out her mercurial side. He is disconcerted by the way she calls everyone's conduct into question by her very presence and by the lewd and razing wisdom she extends to strangers. The lad on the stool is growing edgier. He does not want to be left alone with Grace, who might be demented and a tattooist who accepts that. The lad asks why Cy did not wash his arm before starting. Is this sanitary? Cy tells him to hold still and makes a humorous threat, a stock in trade Riley taught him.

Grace places a small hand on Cy's shoulder and this first touch between them is calming. As she hands him a folded note, Cy observes the fragrance of her unperfumed skin. If Cy can copy it, she will return next day and eventually want many more tattoos all over her body. He will know how best to arrange them. She has to work until 3 p.m. and Maximus will be with her. He can be tethered to the booth, right? She will be in Varga tonight and he can tell her if it is feasible. Cy is sure it will be and he asks confirmation that Grace wants a full-body tattoo. "Sure. Until I am gone, poof, no more," she responds. Grace continues watching Cy work, gently and ruthlessly and she is hypnotized by the sound of the mechanical embroidery. Cy feels Grace's eyes on his slow-moving hand and is suddenly prouder of his work than ever. He wishes he could stop and talk, to reassure himself that Grace is fierce only under threat, but he has the rest of the group to work on and expects more crowds later. Cy glances at Grace from time to time and sees abstract pieces of her in his peripheral vision. She never seems far from a sermon.

The soldiers return and keep their distance from Grace. Cold water has sobered them, but as Grace leaves, whistles and catcalls rise. Grace confronts the largest of the group. Cy is about to intervene when Grace licks her thumb and collects the soldier's cheek flesh like a mammal cleaning her defenseless young. Grace exits quietly as the soldiers banter about her sanity and sexual proclivities. They accept it is Grace's function to unsettle people, just as it is Cy's to tattoo them. Coney Island allows visitors to act out as they would not at home. Anything goes as the business folk sell their wares. Cy does not defend Grace against the soldiers' berating.

Cy will not have a chance to look at Grace's paper until he boards up at 10 p.m. and goes to Varga to unwind. He puts the paper in his shirt pocket, suspecting it will reveal something unacceptable or dire, something that could throw a wrench in the works of their relationship or prune his burgeoning affections. Cy will need a strong drink in hand when he looks at it.



Cy recalls from long ago that war is a peculiar thing. It brings out the best, worst and most incomprehensible in people. They become more than ever creatures of habit, finding relief in repetition and routine. They look for principles, decency, even fragments of God to use as armor against evil. War also gives people an excuse to behave badly. Cy wonders what Reeda would make of the present premeditated and sinister conflict. He wonders if he should write Jonty and Morris. Brooklyn is angry, pessimistic, paranoid and ultimately impotent in hearing tales from relatives in Europe. Military motifs in tattoos are selling incredibly well and the American government's stricter obscenity rules mean earlier tattoos of naked women must be "dressed" in new ink. Cy feels like a puritan, despotic father. The trysting is over and the lovers are leaving.

Grace's paper shows an unblinking, almost hieroglyphic eye. Cy figured Grace was not into birds, butterflies, posies, presidential portraits, or religious symbols. Cy sits at the corner of the busy bar, takes a Scotch and studies the paper. The iris is a pure green sphere, with no natural markings. It is unremitting, unforgiving and makes his head hurt. Riley's voice swaggers in, reminding Cy that all women are witches, but Cy sends him away.

Varga is busy this humid night and it feels like an early-summer thunderstorm is about to erupt. Cy recalls the Morecambe fishermen who could predict weather patterns for landlubbers to within an hour, until, that is, Poseidon raised a spastic finger and they disappeared.

Varga is too full and smoky for Cy to see whether Grace is playing and he accepts from Valerie the second whiskey she thinks he needs. Copying the design will be easy. He will tell Grace he is happy to work on her, to have her company and to get to know her and her body better. He does not understand Grace's eye, however. Why could she want it? Why would she want just one image repeated? Why not mix it up a bit? Cy knows he must be missing the point. How many times would she want it repeated? How much should he charge? Cy had hoped to impress Grace with his delicate shading and feathery detail and he had wanted to show off his skills and some of his original designs. He had wanted the kind of artistic partnership Arturas and Claudia have. Cy leans back and sees Grace facing off against her first opponent of the night. The smoky light improves her features. They acknowledge one another, but her smile is not as fond as earlier. Cy smiles to let her know her idea is doable, hoping she will come to him tomorrow.

Cy works the next day nervous and in anticipation, skipping lunch so he won't miss Grace should she show up. By 3 p.m., when Grace starts work, it is clear she will not appear at the booth. Disappointment cannot extinguish the flame of Cy's optimism. Cy returns to the same bar stool, but with a dangerously empty belly. He drinks the rest of his bottle of whisky. Cy wonders what Grace is thinking by this damnable green and black eye and how Riley would have worked her psyche to find out. He contemplates Grace and Riley facing off like fighting cocks and he consoles himself with the thought that they would not tolerate each other, for all their similarities. Riley would be unable to unscramble Grace's code. Riley never understood women. "Fuck you, *Eliot*," is all Cy can say.



Cy shakes off Mary's offer of food and resumes studying the picture. Valerie admonishes Cy to stop being so broody and self-involved. Cy takes no offense and he considers how the eye speaks subtly of cold, unsettling rejection. It is not the strangest image he has tattooed, but it is in a league of its own. Cy suspects Grace has a fast-flowing undertow, like his mother. He remembers Reeda's eyes, quirks, strengths, scruples and ignominy. Cy feels the alcohol affecting his brain cells and knows he should eat a decent meal and go to sleep, but he is riveted by the idea of Reeda, Grace and the eye. He wants answers and he is happy that dwelling on the images displaces Riley's monologs.

The page has been torn mercilessly from some old book. The destruction seems vaguely occult and certainly abhorrent. Cy imagines a brutal scenario in which fire sweeps Old World buildings, children are carried off and priests are slaughtered. Cy has seen such stories in Grace's eyes and Brooklyn is full of them. Perhaps the eye is Grace's declaration of all she has seen. Grace is probably playing chess in the back room and Cy could go in and demand an explanation of the eye and why she failed to visit him as promised. He could kiss her and wait. Rising, Cy realizes he is too drunk to do anything. Cy is sure Providence will guide Grace to him if he concentrates hard enough on the story he has invented for her. Closing his eyes, Cy sees his tender parable crumble beneath tank tracks and the sheet falls from a cart bearing villagers to ghettos and camps to be ground into dust.

Then Cy sees himself standing with Grace at the water's edge. His body is clean and blank. Grace sings an elegiac song that Cy has never heard before with lyrics he cannot understand. Grace tells him Claudia is upset because she is not getting her tattoos from Arturo, who Grace has known longer. Grace has a small purple bruise on her cheek and a smear of blood in the corner of her mouth. Cy tells Grace she reminds him of someone, but not the man he always talks about when he is drunk, as Grace thinks. She reminds him of some women his mother used to know. Grace lifts her bodice to wipe the trickle of blood and Cy sees the swell of her breast. He is unafraid. They kiss and Cy sees how badly Grace's face has been injured. He slips his hand into her dress and thumbs a nipple. Blood swells in his veins and he begins to harden. She sighs and guides his hand.

Cy awakes with his face on the sticky counter in an empty room, his bottle gone. Mary squeezes his leg and fingers near his crotch, offering to let him sleep upstairs. He declines and is offered cold cuts to take home. He fiddles with the stack of chessboards and looking at the picture of the eye again, sees it outmaneuvering his gaze, playing a game with him. Seconds later he finds himself hitchhiking home.

Grace does not appear angry to be roused so late and she shows little surprise to see Cy bending toward her doorway. He asks what you call it when a game ends in a draw. Grace yawns and answers, "Perpetual check." Cy thinks she should have the tattoos. They will be spectacular. But it is not up to him. Grace laughs and declares The Electric Michelangelo will, of course, do the work. He hears string music in the apartment and realizes he has no idea what time it is. Seeing Grace in her nightgown, Cy knows she will no longer be just shadows and dreams.



Cy's needle alone can sometimes tap a soul for revelatory, awful, enlightening stories to turn into images of their lives. To tattoo is to understand that people want to claim their bodies as their own site on which to tell about themselves. The old body must be destroyed and freed for a new one to be born and yoked. Ashes and Phoenix, beauty and destruction, form the contract. One day he may go mad from the terrible information his needle bites into, the secrets it lances and the memories Cy records on bodies. One day he may go mad from the twists and turns of human misdemeanor and his role in recovering and repairing bodies, helping people atone for their pasts. Some people babble through the procedure, using their voices as desperate antidotes for pain. Most are silent, struggling unsuccessfully for trance and rapture. One young man voices the theory that weather affects women sexually beneath the Coney boardwalk, to the point they permit sweethearts to kiss, fondle and penetrate them. Cy tattoos on him the name of his newborn son. More common than such prattle are bitter revelations of sin, as customers use the pain to move them past the old injuries they revisit. Cy is a conduit for brutalized stories. People spill their lives like pus under a surgeon's scalpel. Riley warned him that serving as a midwife can drive you mad, but it is the price of their profession. Only newborns present a blank canvas.

Cy can put his hands on Grace's body professionally and bear having her sit in his booth without clothing because she is mostly a stranger. Cy has been courting a figment of his imagination rather than the woman with serrated edges who he sees. This split vision keeps him from being driven crazy by arousal. He has imagined Grace's body while masturbating early mornings, but now he pays professional attention to the textures of her back, thighs, chest and shoulders. Cy arranges the boards of his doorway for privacy when working on Grace's breasts or thighs. Maximus is content to be tied up outside and Cy feels Grace may be flirting with the horse when she talks with him in one of her languages. Grace is uncompromising and courageous about extending the design to the edges of her hands, neck and feet. The eyes vary in size to fit the landscape. Cy charges her a reasonable but substantial \$25 for her new skin. It is the best commission of Cy's life.

Cy begins with Grace's legs. He figures an acrobat will have scars on her body, but he finds only a few moles and a birthmark. Cy moves Grace's clothing with medical discretion and averts his eyes when she undresses. The tiny booth keeps them enticingly close. Grace's movements and musky scent intoxicate Cy, who could easily brush against an erogenous area and watch for arousal, but he refrains. That would be unprofessional and contemptible. Coming to know Grace's body without surrendering to lust requires appalling discipline. Cy knows he is fighting one of the world's oldest and most powerful emotions.

Not immune to pain, Grace clenches her fists and breathes with difficulty. Her muscles quiver and protest. She is human after all. She pushes past discomfort, however and forces herself to relax as she instructed the soldier, letting her body absorb and dilute the pain during very long sessions. Sometimes the pain burns and sometimes it is like nails, Grace observes. She prefers nails. Cy omits the usual prattle, because Grace is here for the duration. They talk politics, culture, the new psychology of warfare, subjects



normally foreign to Cy's place of work. They are frequently content to remain quiet. Grace calls Cy by his appropriate and humorous moniker.

Midway through a session on her thigh, Grace asks whether Cy thinks the symbols on his walls will always remain appropriate. He supposes so. Some are hundreds of years old and everyone understands them. God, she responds, has become a joke, a big hole, almost gone. Since people have money now, they do not need to believe in a heaven lined with gold. Cy counters that people will always believe in God. They need to, particularly now. Money or not, people are "weeny" in the grand scheme. New temples are going up in Brooklyn. Grace agrees that persecution abroad makes people search for a reason for those deaths.

What, however, Grace asks, is the point of girls dressed in pirate boots with their tits out like balloons? It has been discovered that women have brains, can work and vote and no longer need to marry. Cy smiles, realizing Grace is the least agnostic person he has met. The girls are just a fantasy, he replies. And what, Grace asks, will women's fantasy be? Big pricks and bulging muscles? Signs must change with the times. The ancient swastika will not survive the Third Reich. Cy suspects some kind of personal disclosure is near. Grace reminds him the Nazis tattoo numbers on Jews' arms and Cy balks, feeling his sobriety menaced. Where has she heard such a horrible thing?

Grace shifts the conversation to abstract art, which breaks everything up and tells us nothing is worth keeping. Cy sees ire smoldering in Grace and does not want it to blaze into fury. That would make working on her impossible. He shrugs that he does not understand Picasso and Braque. It is too messy and its meaning unclear. People like simplicity. Symbols are powerful, conveying much without words. Grace objects, saying complication is good. She has to walk around the chessboard to be sure she is not missing a move. Cy ends this train of thought, saying there are more eyes to finish before nightfall. As he works, Grace peruses the walls again. She points out a red heart, observing it will never go out of fashion. "We remain truly crazy, don't we?" she asks and she slips out of her bra as Cy sets to work directly over her version of that red organ.

Grace does not want the tattoos to pass her collar. People will not pay to see the "Lady of Many Eyes" if they can see her wares on the street. Cy objects that the composition on her naked upper body looks crowded. Grace smiles patiently. Fresh tattoos are in various stages of scabbing. In another situation, Grace might be offering herself to Cy sexually, lying on her back. His mouth might be on her breast. Cy rolls his eyes humorously and agrees that the more eyes the better. He asks whether that is how she will bill herself. He apologizes for pulling at her breast, claiming he is not making a pass. Grace replies she is not making a pass at him either.

Cy is conscious of touching Grace and of how hard it is not to touch her more as her nipples grow erect when slightly touched. Cy wishes they would not do that but is also glad they do. Grace is happy she will make better money charging people to have all her eyes looking back at them than riding in the circus. It will be a good joke, being the invisible woman. She does not care whether people think her new body is beautiful, as



their damn eyes will never use her again. Grace warns Cy not to pretend not to understand, not after knocking on her door in the middle of the night with chess questions, all red in the face.

Cy senses Grace's blithe mood has evaporated, but he plunges forward to ask her to tell her story. Grace is known in the district and talked about with both affection and scorn. Cy pays little heed to rumors but may inadvertently have assimilated some of the calumny. Cy wants to tell Grace he does not care what people think of her. Cy wants to tell Grace these things, but he is afraid she will consider it an insinuation that she is abrasive or a goon, so he keeps his tone light as he digs deeper into her sealed layers. Why, Cy asks, will Grace go on exposing her body to judgment if she does not want to be looked at lecherously? Grace turns on him. She says it will *always* be about body. It is already decided. Cy will have her body, but she can prevent others from thinking it is theirs by setting rules, just as she has the right in America to be rude in conversation. Cy shrinks back, but he is getting used to her outbursts and admires more than fears her passion. It is difficult to be near her when she is naked and zealous, so Cy ends the day's work.

When Cy has nearly perfected self-restraint, Grace takes control to seduce him. The project is nearly complete and Cy is talking shallowly about his past when Grace snaps her fingers for him to stop, stands up bare-breasted and demands to see Cy's tattoos. When he tries to evade her, she lifts his shirt and touches his stomach. He explains that the "Stanley" lettered on his chest is his late father. Cy's voice melts as Grace traces the ship with her finger, then resumes stroking him. Cy will have to forgive Riley some day, Grace observes, drinking every night at Varga is an effort to do so. Grace's hands soothe the wounds her words reopen. Cy moans, realizing the propriety he commends himself on has been misplaced. Grace is finished talking and a new weather system settles around her, without warning or forecast. She fingers the waistband of Cy's trousers and he wants to touch her hair or breasts or call out her name but resists, locking his jaw and biting down on his lip until it bleeds. He knows he has to let her be, like Aurora Borealis.

As Grace steps toward Cy, a disgruntled drunk pounds on the booth and calls the "English asshole" out. Grace advises Cy to go. The man demands a refund and refuses to return later. Cy examines the forearm and tells him he has obviously picked the scab off against strict orders, so there will be no refund. Cy offers to repair the damage later. The man really wants to transfer responsibility for his rash and ruinous vacation to someone else and will not back down. When Grace emerges, dressed and scowling, he lets fly a string of insults about substandard work. A fight appears likely when Grace aims a knife past the complainer's nose and into the booth's wood. Both men look at her in amazement. The man retreats and Grace shakes her head at Cy, telling him she doubts he would survive having to hit another human being. He is too kind.

By midsummer 1940, after 16 separate sessions, 190 tattoos adorn Grace's body, turning her into an extraordinary tree of eyes. The last one covers her lower back. The work shines beneath a sheen of sweat. Neither Grace nor Cy has mentioned the encounter in the booth, but both are frustrated by the rude interruption and daft chivalry.



Grace never touches Cy again and he retreats behind his professional codes. Interactions inside Varga are few and there are no late-night visitations to her door. Cy would be devastated to find another man there now. Finishing the last eye, Cy kisses it, observing that Grace tastes of life. He doubts she even feels his lips. "So, you're done," he says. "And the best of luck to you, duckie." Within a week, Grace is healed and on display in Luna Park. Within a month, she will be gone.

Part 2, The Lady of Many Eyes Analysis

"The Lady of Many Eyes" is the moniker Grace adopts as she has The Electric Michelangelo transform her body into an incredible tree of eyes to change her profession from horseback performer to human freak. The chapter slowly develops the portrait of an enigmatic woman determined to conceal her past. It continues exploring Cy's dysfunctional attitude toward women and sex, looking back frequently to his experiences in Morecambe involving his mother and his master, traits of both he sees in Grace. Cy comes to grips with the effects of losing his first love, realizing he has no one to blame but himself for a loveless life. The many references to chess strategy are handled clearly enough for non-players to understand because Cy is portrayed as a novice. Religion is taken up more directly than before in an anachronistic "Death of God" debate in the context of the unfolding Holocaust. The chapter ends leaving it unclear whether Cy and Grace will ever consummate the thwarted encounter. The concluding words draw the reader into finding out how, within a month, Grace will be gone. The answer comes with shocking suddenness.



Part 2, History's Ink

Part 2, History's Ink Summary

Sulfuric acid burns through Grace's dress and into her flesh, almost to the bone and would have gone further had alkali not been administered directly after the assault. The assailant works with premeditation, timing precisely the two stages of his plan. No one notices Malcolm Sedak enter Varga, move leisurely through the crowded bar and approach within four feet of Grace at the chess table. Only after the fact is his long overcoat thought sinister. It conceals a sealed container, which Sedak opens and slings its contents with a movement as smooth and elegant as an orchestra conductor. Grace looks down to see her midsection soaked by what might be chowder, until her dress dissolves and she begins to scream in panic.

To Grace, the few seconds before Sedak hurls the antidote, ammonia, seem like a lifetime. Grace becomes a chemistry experiment. It is a strange plan of damnation and salvation in tandem. Sedak later reveals his intention was not to murder Grace, because that would be wrong. He wants only to bring her body back to God's original purity of naked cleanness. Pain is essential to the penance. Sedak portrays himself as the Lord's hired lunatic. Having seen something unholy in Grace even before the tattooing, Sedak prays for intervention and the Lord tells him to gather evidence about her. Sedak sees Grace as Satan's daughter, whore and pawn.

Sedak chants this confession only later, through a jaw wired shut because immediately after the attack onlookers hold him down while mighty Claudia pounds him nearly to death. Claudia flees as police arrive and at first they cannot tell which of the wrecked bodies is the casualty. Grace lies quietly because someone unseen has slipped her morphine. She smells like a struck match and looks like a newly shed serpent.

Grace had briefly gained popularity as the least demurely dressed of the six tattooed women on the Luna podium. All eyes watch her mesmerizing body of eyes. Every week she was earning four times what her tattoos cost and she was receiving lucrative bookings and invitations.

Henry arrives at Cy's booth, sober despite heavy drinking, as Cy is closing up. Had Henry not had so calming a Southern tone, Cy might have beaten him for the news he delivers. Henry admits giving Grace a double dose of morphine and hopes it will not kill her. As Grace lies in the hospital, the assault becomes the talk of Coney Island. Fined for damage to the bar and remanded to a Brooklyn asylum, Sedak receives the attention rather than the presumed slut he assaulted.

Grace struggles for life. Visitors are forbidden for fear of infection, but nurses keep Cy informed in the waiting room. The news is bad and the smells remind Cy of his mother's hospitalization. Cy cannot go into Grace's room because he is not a blood relative. Grace is only his neighbor and his Sistine Chapel. Cy grows paranoid. To get him to



leave, the nurses forbid him to use the orderlies' washroom and he turns into a fetid boggart, superstitious that if he leaves, Grace will die. On the fourth night, a doctor sees Cy rooting for leftover food and calls security to remove him. Walking home, Cy buys not food but liquor. In the morning, buying breakfast, Cy remembers Maximus. Cy goes to check on him and finds that Claudia has already broken down the door and removed the animal. Cy steps into Grace's apartment for the first time and sees Maximus has imprinted his character on it as fully as any husband might have. How could the landlady not have known? Everything is possible in this world, Cy muses and above all love for a woman of many eyes. Cy observes no more than that Grace eats, sleeps and breathes.

Cy cleans himself up and heads back to a better reception at the hospital. A doctor tells him that Grace's internal organs are unscathed and that if the delicate organ of her skin survives, so will she, but there will be permanent damage and her life will be more complicated. Cy never before thought about the skin this way. It has always been just canvas, but now he realizes it is as vital to life as the loving heart.

The head nurse orders Cy to go home, return to work and if his friend gets well enough to leave, she will find him. The tall woman reminds Cy of his mother and he kisses her cheek before leaving, because he misses Reeda.

The rest of the season is a blur for Cy as he deals brusquely with anyone who comes to his booth. His hand continues to work, but the rest of him retires. Cy refuses to force himself to talk. At night, he drinks but never enough. Coney Island looks sick to him, morphed overnight into a full-blown monster. Claudia has been paying to have Maximus stabled and exercised daily. Cy visits the horse for hours at a time to assure him of Grace's love. Maximus calms and relaxes Cy, who now feels menaced by New York. Where did Sedak come from? Cy wants to hate Sedak and the hatred spreads to cover everything touched by Grace's demise. Valerie bans Cy from Varga. Hearing constantly about Sedak's condition does not help Cy's mindset, but Henry works for that hospital. In September, Claudia and Arturas announce this is their last season in Coney Island. They will work the California beaches. Cy declines to go along. He is thinking of enlisting.

When Grace visits his booth, Cy wants to hold her hand and pass through it something of his own heart, but he cannot. In the open she unbuttons her dress and stands naked before Cy, showing the still unhealed ravaging. Cy cannot control his horror and weeps uncontrollably. Cy never saw Grace during her rehabilitation and he does not recognize her as she approaches, walking like an old woman. Cy cannot fathom her bravery and his clamoring heart cannot read the love in her eyes.

Grace's pubic hair is mostly gone and she looks like a little girl. Her left breast is smaller than the right and its nipple is ruined. Many of the tattooed eyes on her torso are erased. Grace has run, dried and hardened. She looks like strip-mined earth, an abstract painting, the rock pavements of the Yorkshire moors. Grace wipes away Cy's tears and tells him how doctors can now perform amazing skin grafts. Cy nods and



cannot look away. A passer-by whistles and Grace turns around, sending him hurriedly on his way.

Cy has to sit down and remember to breathe. He studies Grace's midriff. Hospital gauze has left the skin crosshatched. Her eyes still glimmer with a spirit of rebellion. Grace demands Cy stop making that face. She needs his help. She produces a tube of cream the doctors say she must apply, but there are places on her body she cannot reach. Cy applies some to her thighs as she strokes his hair. Cy's eyes fill again and he kisses Grace's stomach, hips and breasts. Finally, his tongue finds the only soft channel left and Grace sways exquisitely. Cy feels a series of jolts run through her and then she is still.

Voice breaking, Grace thanks Cy, addressing him by his name and says Claudia is to take Maximus. Grace steps away, dresses and asks Cy to promise her one more favor. Cy dares not ask where she is going. He wants to tell her to stay but knows it will sound absurd. Grace is already leaving this failed world for some nameless country ahead. Cy says he will, of course, any way he can. They will meet at the fountain at midnight and Cy must be sober. Grace kisses Cy on both cheeks and smiles. Cy watches her stiff, careful retreat, unable to call out. When Grace is out of sight, Cy lets out a wolf-like howl and slumps to the ground. He thinks of the great sucking sea at Morecambe, its tide too swift to outrun, like the maddening insolvency of love.

Using his bewitching, peachy voice, Henry tells police about the hospital that night. It is unusually quiet. Performing his rounds, Henry notes the service elevator is stuck between floors and figures it is just acting up. By 3 a.m., Henry is warmed with brandy and begins to relax. The elevator is still stuck, so Henry climbs the stairs to where Sedak and 15 other miscreants are housed. The guard is missing and the gate is ajar. Henry takes another slug before entering the ward. He is surprised by a patch of orange around the corner and a bitter smell, like road tar. A metal bin is afire and Henry figures someone has tried to burn the asylum down. Checking cautiously for escaped patients, Henry finds the missing guard, who reports two assailants. Henry checks the rooms, but no one is missing. When they pull back Sedak's sheets, they find him strapped down and naked with his head covered. Removing the pillowcase, they discover Sedak burned and blinded.

Henry lies to the police for four hours, not telling them it was he who left the back door unlocked, gave the watchman a bottle of rum and opened a second floor window so smoke could escape, all as he had been instructed. Something about his story does not add up, but Sedak is incomprehensible. By the time detectives reach Cy's booth, it is dismantled and by the time they reach the barbershop, Cy has fled the country. Sedak's victim also vanishes without a trace. No one is torn up about Sedak, so the file is closed.

Cy returns to Pedder Street in the winter of 1946. Inside, it is as dark and damp as a crypt and his leg, wounded in the war, aches. The walls are bare and cracking and the musty velvet curtain is still hanging. Cy can almost smell and hear Riley's ghost, but he no longer suffers recollections. Upstairs, nothing has changed. Morecambe shows few



signs of war. Strolling the mud flats, Cy thinks about his mother and he later visits her grave to tell her about America and the war. Wishing to pay his regards to his father's photograph, Cy walks to the Trawlers' Cooperative, but he finds it locked. Someone asks what he wants and Cy turns to Morris Gibbs. They catch up over tea, because Cy no longer drinks. Jonty, Cy learns, died in France, leaving behind a wife and three children. Cy has no plans. Morris insists Cy come for Christmas.

No one knows when Morecambe's decline began. The closing of northern mills and foundries and the introduction of holiday packages to nicer climates combine to shrink the seaside resort business. Still, Cy finds plenty of work. When wrecking balls remove old fixtures of the town, Cy is content to gaze across the bay, less and less accompanied by old ghosts. In 1965, news that the Steeplechase is closing gives Cy a sentimental tug but brings no sorrow. Change is unstoppable. Tattooing endures because it is as old as the hills and stranger than time. Human hearts and souls always require painting.

On Cy's 65th birthday, as he is thinking about retiring, Nina Shearer waltzes into his shop. Cy vaguely expects her, because unusual events always occur on significant calendar days. She asks Cy if he does piercings. Why not? Not many people could match Nina's astringency, Cy thinks. Her eyes are marshy green and bright. Nina looks like trouble with a capital T and ought to piss off. Giving Cy a cheeky look, she makes clear she will leave in her own good time. She touches Cy's flash cards and asks about prices. Admiration of Cy's work seems to reduce her brassiness. She wants "Mother" woven through flowers. She wants to study art in Manchester.

In her day, Nina's grandmother Gaynor, of big nipple fame, was nothing like this loud, filthy-mouthed, unapologetic teenager, who Cy quickly comes to like very much. By her fifth visit, Cy offers Nina an apprenticeship and gives her Riley's old art books, which she finds too old-fashioned. Nina favors abstracts. Her punk rock music gives Cy a headache and she laughs at his jazz and swing and nags him about his passé hippie hair and earring. Cy blushes at her open sexual talk. Nina hammers Cy for explanations of why he does this and that and why she should have to learn about jerry rigging old equipment when new tools can be bought from catalogs. What is so special about blue ink? Why does Cy always talk about love as though there is an empty chair next to him? When Nina drives him crazy, Cy yells at her to shut up, but it takes very little to get the conversation restarted. At the day's end, Cy finds the shop too quiet when Nina is gone. Cy will not allow her to pierce customers in his shop.

A year passes swiftly and Cy again faces the time of year when the women he has most loved departed. He dreams of his old booth, oversized chess pieces dancing in Varga, Reeda and Riley smoking opium and Jonty kissing nurses in the war. He sees Grace on horseback, riding quickly across the sands of the bay. Cy awakens, electrified, feeling young again. He remembers Grace's hair as she touched his tattooed ship, always using his moniker. He thinks about her eyes, real and tattooed and knows she has not left him. Perhaps Grace is still living and raging somewhere in the world. Grace is why he never marries any of the women Nina points out. Grace occupies that empty chair.



Cy looks through his stored possessions and finds his oldest mermaid drawing. He remembers designing her, being forbidden to display her and assuring every customer she is unique. Business is slack that afternoon when Nina arrives, her hair changed. Electricity has been knocked out, so they light candles. Cy pulls out a bamboo shaft and hammer and rolls up his trouser leg. "They won't be asking us to switch the lights on this year, will they Nina, my dove?"

Part 2, History's Ink Analysis

The final chapter tells of the horrifying attack perpetrated on Grace by a religious fanatic, Cy's lonely vigil at the hospital, their passionate reunion at his shop and Grace's plot to get revenge on her attacker. Cy and Grace vanish before the police can find them and the story jumps forward five years to Cy's return to post-war Morecambe. Fast-forwarding again, it finds Cy on the brink of retirement when the granddaughter of the girl whose nipples first aroused him as a boy appears in his studio and turns his life upside down. Nina becomes Cy's apprentice and contentious life-sustainer, but Grace will forever invisibly occupy love's chair beside him.



Characters

Cyril Parks (Cy)

The "Electric Michelangelo" of the novel's title, Cy is a master tattoo artist on two continents. Born on the day in 1907 when his fisherman father perishes on the Irish Sea, Cy is raised by his widowed mother Reeda in a boarding house that caters to northerner workers suffering from tuberculosis. Cy is pressed into service tending to them, although he loathes their condition. In school, Cy shows interest and promise in drawing and Eliot Riley takes Cy in as an apprentice in his tattoo parlor. There Cy learns the ropes of creating art on skin and he grows adept at handling his demanding, oppressive, drunken misanthrope of a master.

After Reeda's death in 1923 and Riley's suicide ten years later, Cy flees to America, settling in Brooklyn. He plies his art in a booth Coney Island by summer and in the back room of a barbershop off-season. He befriends Henry Beausang, a Riley-like homosexual drunkard who works nights in a hospital. In 1940, Cy finally meets his downstairs neighbor Grace, a bareback rider and tightrope walker in Coney Island. With Grace, Cy overcomes his aversion to love, which deepens in him from the moment they first meet in the park until he completes a full-body tattoo of black and green eyes. When Grace is brutally attacked by a religious fanatic and left mutilated in 1941, Cy conspires with Henry and Grace to get revenge. Cy then flees Brooklyn to enlist in the Canadian Air Force. Badly wounded in World War II, Cy returns home in 1946 to an economically depressed Morecambe and re-establishes his practice in Riley's workshop. With the town in economic decline, Cy contemplates retiring, but on his 65th birthday finds his life turned upside down by a teenage would-be artist who he accepts as his apprentice.

Reeda Parks

Reeda Parks is Cy's mother and the owner of the Bayview Hotel, a seaside resort catering to consumptives. Widowed the day her son is born, Reeda raises Cy to help in the hotel, ministering to people who she maintains have a right to a little pleasure in life amidst their suffering. Reeda accepts gore almost without notice. In secret alliance with Muriel Preston, Reeda runs a midnight abortion clinic and has ties to a band of women activists.

Reeda encourages Cy to view the human body as something not to be ashamed of. She admits knowing Riley when Cy first mentions meeting him and she explains to Cy that the man is a tattooist. Every time Cy gives Reeda part of his earnings at his first paid job, Reeda enters it in her detailed account book and lights her husband's old pipe, almost ceremoniously. Reeda at first opposes Cy's decision to accept a tattoo apprenticeship, but she gradually talks herself into agreeing, providing that Cy arrange a meeting between her and Riley and never visit the Johnsons, mesmerists who she



considers a moral disgrace. When Reeda discovers she has breast cancer, she arranges for the Bayview to be liquidated and undergoes a mastectomy that cannot save her life. A deathbed conversation with Cy and Riley makes it clear that Reeda was intimately connected with Riley earlier in life. After a harrowing few weeks at home, Reeda dies in 1923. Her memory haunts Cy until late in his life.

Eliot Riley

Eliot Riley is the foul-mouthed, binge-drinking master tattoo artist in Morecambe to whom Cy apprentices. They first meet when Cy breaks Riley's window trying to cut down an effigy of the Kaiser hanging outside Riley's Pedder Street home studio. Riley's blue eyes captivate Cy, who has a sense of déjà vu and of a future shared destiny. Reeda admits knowing Riley and clarifies for her son what Riley does for a living. She discounts rumors that the unpopular Catholic does unspeakable things with severed pigs' heads. Riley corners Cy and offers him an apprenticeship and a chance to learn about honor. He takes Cy for his first drink. The conceited self-proclaimed genius fails to win Cy over rationally, but that night he convinces Cy by demonstrating his talent and dazzling him with his brilliant full-body artwork.

Working alongside Riley and ministering to him during his drunken binges give Cy unique insights into Riley's split personality. Riley is an undisciplined teacher, imposing his opinions on the material and he keeps Cy frustrated by making him perform menial tasks until after Reeda's death. Talking with Reeda on her deathbed breaks Riley up. He agrees to take Cy in, but he allows Cy to begin tattooing clients only after watching the frustrated apprentice undertake a commission on his own. They work side-by-side for ten years until a gang takes Riley to Moffat Ravine and pounds his inking hand to a pulp, removing his only saving grace. Riley sets out to kill himself by depression, alcohol and starvation. After a year of silent, stubborn decline during which the business also falters, Riley finds and swallows a bottle of bleach then staggers home to die in Cy's presence. He is buried without ceremony in the Irish Sea, as he requested. Cy closes Riley's studio in 1933 and flees to America, where Riley's ghost haunts every aspect of his life, professional, philosophical and sexual. Both Grace and Henry are Riley's alter egos.

Grace

Cy's downstairs neighbor, a bareback rider and tightrope walker on Coney Island, Grace keeps her horse, Maximus, in her Brooklyn apartment. Grace speaks many languages, maintains an air of mystery about her existence and plays a masterful game of chess at the Varga Oyster Bar. Cy falls in love with Grace as he covers her body with a shocking eye motif and they almost consummate their love before an irate customer interrupts them. Grace's new career as "The Lady of Many Eyes" is taking root when she is brutally attacked by a religious fanatic named Malcolm Sedak, who hurls acid and ammonia on her with precise timing to leave her body mutilated but spare her life. Sedak's intention is to restore the purity of God's image that the tattooing has befouled.



After a long and painful recuperation, Grace visits Cy's booth, fearlessly shows him her ruined body and recruits him and Henry to help her get revenge. While Cy holds a rag in Sedak's mouth to muffle his cries, Grace gouges out his eyes and disappears. Cy, who also leaves Brooklyn, cannot conjure up Grace's memory as well or as often as he wishes, but he thinks of his blunt, free-spirited lover living and raging somewhere in the world.

Charles Henry (Henry) Beausang III

Henry is a Georgia-born drunkard who becomes friends with Cy in Brooklyn. Disowned by his rich Baptist mother when he is discovered having homosexual relations at his wedding reception, Henry flees north and works nights as an orderly in a psychiatric hospital. He begins drinking as soon as he gets off work, if not before and he sleeps like an alley cat by day, wherever he collapses. This is often in fellow Georgian Den Jones' barber chair. Henry first meets Cy when he invades the inner sanctum of his tattoo room in the rear of the shop. They become friends and Henry sells Cy stolen hospital gauze and needles at a cut rate and replaces Riley as the object of Cy's protection and salvaging of drunks. Homophobes frequently attack Henry in New York for what he is willing to do. When Grace is attacked in the Varga Oyster Bar, Henry relieves her pain with a double dose of morphine, then runs to tell Cy. Henry is the inside man in the plot to blind Grace's assailant, Malcolm Sedak and he concocts a story sufficiently complex to allow Cy and Grace to flee the country before the police can close in on them.

Malcolm Sedak

Malcolm Sedak is a Brooklyn chess player and religious fanatic who conceives the plan to restore Grace's tattooed body to "God's original purity of naked cleanness" by hurling acid and ammonia on her in precise quantities and proper timing to disfigure her without killing her. After the attack in the Varga Oyster Bar, Sedak is nearly beaten nearly to death. Arrested and locked up in a hospital for the criminally insane, Sedak is attacked at night by Claudia Overas and then locked up in the secure psychiatric ward of the hospital in which Henry Beausang works as an orderly. Henry serves as the inside man for a plot that allows Grace and Cy to strap Henry down and gouge out his eyes in savage retribution for his crime. Sedak is an unattractive victim and the case is closed after a cursory investigation.

Mrs. Baxter

One of the consumptives visiting the Bayview Hotel, Mrs. Baxter's face is bleached of color except for her vividly painted lips. She continues to visit Morecambe even after her husband dies of black lung disease. Her commendation of Reeda Parks' renowned potted shrimp dish, which Mrs. Baxter is convinced Reeda also provides for King George, becomes one of the novel's motifs.



Eva Brennan

Eva Brennan is a smiling, blond, freckled 14-year-old girl from Yorkshire who visits Bayview with her parents in 1920 and catches young Cy's attention as the loveliest thing he has ever seen besides the Aurora Borealis and Gaynor Shearer's stand-up nipples. Cy tries for three days to find a way to talk to Eva and he aches for her in bed at night. Deciding he must enlist his friends to woo Eva, Cy loses her to the more experienced Jonty on the last day of the Brennans' vacation. Eva, he is convinced later in life, prevents him from falling in love.

Paddy Broadbent

Paddy Broadbent is the bartender at Morecambe's Dog and Partridge Inn who helps Cy care for Riley whenever the tattooist drinks himself into oblivion. Following Riley's burial at sea, Paddy shares a drink with Cy and suggests he join a circus and see the world. An acquaintance in Liverpool provides the false papers Cy needs to immigrate to America.

Den Jones

Den Jones, the Brooklyn barber, is a transplanted Southern black who gives Cy space to continue his tattooing work in the off-season. His is friends with Henry Beausang, who grew up 15 miles from his home in Georgia and Den introduces Cy and Henry.

Aunt Doris

Cy's only known relative, Aunt Doris is his mother's sister from Yorkshire. She comes to Morecambe to care for her dying sister, Reeda and offers to take in the orphaned Cy. Cy accompanies her halfway to Yorkshire before deciding to stay with Riley instead.

Morris Gibbs

Morris Gibbs is Cy's redheaded boyhood friend, who with Jonty Preston form a trio hunting mischief and distraction in Morecambe Bay. Morris' older brother, Terrance, holds the record for the largest eel captured in Morecambe, which is pickled in a large jar and displayed for money. It grows into a local legend. Morris figures out how to save Cy from his foolish tempting of quicksand at age 10. They meet again after World War II when Cy returns home to Morecambe.



Reginald Greene

Cy's first employer, Reginald Greene takes him into his print shop and talks incessantly about war memories and a frigid wife. Greene cannot afford to be seen consorting with Riley because of the tattooist's low standing with the public.

The Human Fountain

The Human Foundation is a Coney Island freak who shoots water from his fingertips and is fed through tubes forced under the skin of his forearms. Cy talks with him and is impressed by his level of professionalism in maintaining his equipment. They talk shop about disinfecting and lament Coney Island's changing atmosphere.

Lulu

Lulu is the 20-year-old gentle performing elephant that is electrocuted as a Coney Island attraction after accidentally crushing a visitor at the park. People are disappointed by the spectacle, which helps Cy realize the park is doomed.

Mary and Valerie

Mary and Valerie are conjoined twins who own and run Cy's favorite hangout on Coney Island, the Vargas Oyster Bar. Veterans of the Coney Island freak shows, they use their savings to get out of the business just before apathy toward freakery and acrobats sets in. They keep order in the bar by playing good cop and bad cop. Mary has the softer disposition, while Valerie is intimidating and uninterested in romance. Cy calls them the "Sweet and Sour Sisters," and in a drunken moment he once offers to tattoo that across their bosoms. They are remarkably well-adjusted, fearless and enterprising women.

Maximus

Maximus is Grace's magnificent dark horse on whose back she performs her circus act and who lives with her in her apartment below Cy. Maximus is perfectly trained and he is perceptive of the humans around him. He takes an instant liking to Cy, which impresses Grace. After being disfigured and intent on leaving Coney Island, Grace bequeaths Maximus to Claudia Overas, who is heading out to California.

Arturas (Turo) Overas

Arturas Overas is the massive, hairy, blond, Teutonic weightlifter-turned-tattooist who with wife Claudia befriends Cy in Brooklyn. Arturas took up the trade in Europe after inuring a knee. Doodling on his cast, he figures this is a way to remain with the circus and he turns Claudia into a head-to-toe living canvas. Working under the professional



name "Black Baron," his opinion of his talent exceeds reality, but he is a competent tattooist. After Grace is attacked, Arturas and Claudia decide to move to California to ply the beaches there.

Claudia Overas

Claudia Overas is Arturas' orange-haired wife who has the sculptured body of an Olympian. Insensible to cruelty about her non-female form, kind-hearted and sturdy-minded, Claudia displays her tattooed form in the Human Picture Gallery of Coney Island's Luna Park while performing feats of strength that enthrall the public. Having suffered six miscarriages, Claudia is a regular at an exhibit of abandoned premature babies. Only Grace knows this secret and she often has to rescue her hysterical friend there. When Grace is attacked in the Varga Oyster Bar, Claudia beats her assailant nearly to death. She and Arturas decide to leave Coney Island for California and Grace bequeaths Maximus to Claudia's care.

Stanley Parks

Stanley Parks is Cy's father who died in 1907 while captaining the *Sylvia Rose*. A photograph of Stanley standing upright at work is in the hall at the Morecambe Trawlers' Cooperative, the only image Cy has of him. Stanley left his son a pocket watch and a pair of cufflinks. His widow, Reeda Parks, defends Stanley as a good, cautious fisherman with salt in his blood, but late in life she admits he could be tryingly stubborn. Reeda sometimes smokes Stanley's pipe almost ritualistically.

Jonty Preston

Jonty Preston is Cy's boyhood friend, who with Morris Gibbs form a trio hunting mischief and distraction in Morecambe Bay. Somewhat experienced in kissing thanks to his mother's beauty potions, which Jonty distributes in the schoolyard and skilled at getting people to talk, Jonty is enlisted by Cy in 1920 to help him woo the beautiful Eva Brennan. Instead, Jonty steals her from Cy. After World War II, Cy learns that Jonty perished in France, leaving a wife and three children.

Muriel Preston

Muriel Preston is Jonty's mother and Reeda Park's acquaintance, with whom she snipes at neighbors. They are less friends in the normal sense than partners in a midnight abortion trade run from the Bayview. The rotund, petite Preston carries a bag of sharp instruments from her house on Lord Street. Her storefront, "The Surgery," sells gypsy-like concoctions, but her forte is electro-therapy.



Gaynor Shearer

Gaynor Shearer is the Morecambe Bathing Beauty who Cy and his friends most admire in July 1918 for nipples that stand up like broom handles through her bathing suit. Her granddaughter Nina becomes Cy's apprentice in his later years.

Nina Shearer

Nina Shearer is Gaynor's loud, inquisitive, filthy-mouthed, unapologetic granddaughter, who at age 17 wanders into Cy's shop on his 65th birthday, looking to get additional piercings. Her attitude softens when she sees Cy's flash and after five visits, he offers to allow the aspiring but frustrated artist an apprenticeship. She resists learning things for which she sees no value and the generation gap shows in nearly everything they discuss or do. Various aspects of her personality remind Cy of earlier friends and he finds the studio too quiet when she takes her argumentative mouth home for the night. Her openness about discussing sexual matters particularly unsettles the old man.

Señora Ubago

Señora Ubago is Cy and Grace's aged, blind Sephardic landlady who overlooks the non-visual signs that Grace is keeping a horse in her apartment.

Colin Willacy

Colin Willacy is the stern, eccentric headmaster of Morecambe Grammar School who is given to whacking errant students' wet palms with a willow cane. His impromptu and thorough sex education lecture to fatherless Cy is more painful than a caning, but it opens Cy's eyes to a new realm. Colin eventually canes the boy who uses his newfound knowledge to indoctrinate his schoolmates. Ironically, Colin's daughter Lucy is renowned for her talents for fellatio.



Objects/Places

The Aveune Psychiatric Hospital

The Aveune Pyschiatric Hospital is Henry Beausang's place of employment where he, Cy and Grace conspire to blind her assailant, Malcolm Sedak, who is confined in the special security criminal ward.

The Bayview Hotel

The Bayview Hotel is Reeda Parks' 16-room seaside establishment on Morecambe Bay that caters to consumptives. With neighboring boarding houses, the Bayview resembled a poorly brushed row of lower teeth. By night it serves as Reeda Parks' and Muriel Preston's secret abortion clinic. Reeda liquidates it when she learns she has cancer and the proceeds from the sale finance Cy's move to America.

Brooklyn, N.Y.

Brooklyn is the largest of New York City's five boroughs to which Cy immigrates in 1933. Cy's apartment is in the multi-ethnic Sheepshead Bay section, while his seasonal tattoo booth is in Coney Island. At the time of the novel, Brooklyn's most beloved institution is its major league baseball team, the Dodgers, who play at Ebbet's Field until 1957, when they move to Los Angeles. Cy realizes that his business depends on learning enough about this community staple to be able to talk it up.

Coney Island

Despite its name, Coney Island is a peninsula at the southern tip of Brooklyn, facing the Atlantic Ocean, where Cy rents a small booth on Oceanic Wave during the lucrative summer seasons to run his tattoo business. Already in decline, Coney Island boasts three competing amusement parks, Luna Park, Dreamland and Steeplechase Park, all of which are mentioned in the novel. Also mentioned are the original Nathan's Famous hot dog stand and the Russian immigrants who will later revitalize the area.

The Dog and Partridge

The Dog and the Partridge is Eliot Riley's favorite Morecambe pub, where he gets Cy drunk for the first time and convinces him to become his apprentice.



Flash

Flash is a tattoo artist's professional portfolio, consisting of sheets or books of standard designs organized by theme. Masters of the art, such as Riley and Cy, disdain flash as too mechanical, preferring to freehand their own designs. They display flash, however, to get customers' minds moving.

Morecambe Bay

Morecambe is a resort town in Lancashire, England, facing Morecambe Bay, which is notorious for its deadly quicksand and swift tides. The town lies due east of the border between North and South Ireland. History shows it thriving in the mid-twentieth century, housing the Miss Great Britain beauty contest from 1956-1989, but Hall moves this era of greatness back to Cy's growing up years during and just after World War I and depicts it in decline after World War II, when Cy returns home from America. Riley's tattoo parlor is at 11 Pedder Street in the seedier end of town. Moffat Ravine, an isolated area four miles outside town that is rumored to be haunted by saber-tooth monsters, is where a gang of toughs abducts Riley and pounds his inking hand to a pulp, ending his career as a tattooist.

The Varga Oyster Bar

The Varga Oyster Bar is Cy's favorite hangout on Coney Island, owned and run for years by Mary and Valerie, who are Siamese twins. On Tuesday and Wednesday evenings, raucous chess tournaments are held in the Varga's gaming room, during one of which Malcolm Sedak assaults Grace.



Themes

Vision

The Electric Michelangelo opens with a young Cy Parks trying to not to see reality in the bloody basins he handles. The organ of sight, the eye, is constantly in focus. The sight of an abortion in progress confuses the young boy's attitude toward his mother. The sight of a beauty queen's erect nipples begins molding Cy's attitude toward sex and the sight of his best friend kissing the first girl he loves finishes the process, locking Cy in a loveless if not sexless existence. The sight of Riley's striking blue eyes immediately creates a bond to the gruff old man and the sight of Riley's steady hand and richly tattooed body conquers Cy's doubts about accepting an apprenticeship. Riley's tortured hand, tragic as it is in itself, blinds the tattooist to any reason to go on living and leads to his suicide. Watching the sun set over the Irish Sea when Riley's body is consigned to the deep, coupled with memories of his mother's explanation of nighttime, inspires Cy's voyage to America and awe at his first glimpses of New York City interferes with his adaptation to his new life. The light of Brooklyn inspires him. Seeing the uncontrolled corruption of Coney Island repels Cy and the nature of its evil is conformed by watching Lulu's heartless execution. The mysterious shadow cast by Grace and Maximus captivates Cy's heart and the sight of Grace's naked body as he covers it with a multitude of black and green eyes inflames his passion. The sight of her tortured body and the destruction of his masterpiece, moves Cy to tears and motivates his participation in the culminating act of revenge, the gouging out of the assailant's eyes. Green-eyed Nina and aging Cy see each other's virtues and foibles at the end of this most visual novel.

Body Art

The Electric Michelangelo explores at great length the history, methodology, sociology, aesthetics, dynamics and morality of tattooing. First presented as the work of "scrapers, scratchers and scoundrels," tattooing is seen as a counter-culture activity performed in the seedier end of town, primarily because of the anti-social personality of Morecambe's premier practitioner. Riley delights in annoying and provoking society. He has plenty of customers, however, because tattooing dates back to the Pharaohs and is practiced around the world. Its imagery is immediately understandable, whether it attracts or repels the viewer. Riley teaches and Cy wholeheartedly accepts, that the role of the tattooist is to draw out of the prospective human canvass whatever hope, fears, memories, or conflicts express the essence of his or her being.

Exorcism frequently precedes the application of ink. Cathartic pain is a part of the creative process. Viewers react viscerally more so than aesthetically to the wearer's displaying to, even imposing on, the world of his or her accepted essence. Women channel the pain better than men and more honestly appreciate the results. Bravado too often interferes with the male psyche. Master tattooists realize they stand in a rich



historical continuum, facilitate people's psychological well being and requiring development of subtle skills that move them past artisanship to true artistry, no matter what society's attitude. Images such as the mermaid stem from primal sexual urges and offer a siren song, particularly to men of the sea. Women enjoy no such overt imagery, but sexuality is rarely far from the art applied to their bodies. Amusingly, changing social mores and legislation were a boon to tattooists, as existing nudity had to be "dressed." Body art has provided author Hall an incredibly rich motif for colorful, thoughtful writing.

Sex

The Electric Michelangelo explores Cy's sexual development from typical adolescent fascination with a bathing beauty's prominent nipples to the onset of a life-long dysfunction that began when his first puppy love, whose "bosoomers" are bigger than bee stings, betrays him by kissing his best friend. Cy's mother is frank about the sanctity of the human body, but Cy falls more heavily under the influence of a perpetual adolescent, Eliot Riley, under whom he apprentices. Riley never gets far beyond the view that women's "bitty-bags" are difficult to tattoo. All women are witches, with an innate tolerance for pain not for childbearing but for burning at the stake. They do not require tender courting but rough animal sex. In Riley's studio, Cy graduates to the "real thing" with women, some who arrive with loins already aflame and offer themselves as a gratuity, while others grow enflamed under the needle. Cy would like to court some of the women he allows to enjoy him, but he fears Riley's derision. Cy absorbs the mythical power of sexually oriented tattoo designs, particularly mermaids, but only in Grace does he understand the dynamics that have imprisoned his sexuality. To remain professional, Cy fights temptation, which frustrates Grace and sexual consummation of their relationship is preempted by her terrible flesh-destroying assault.



Style

Point of View

The Electric Michelangelo is narrated anonymously in the third person, past tense. The author inserts herself into the text and never suggests any source of information for the story she tells. The novel focuses on Cyril (Cy) Parks, whose professional moniker is "The Electric Michelangelo," and moves back and forth between describing his external actions and words and the internal workings of his mind. Other characters are developed almost exclusively through the protagonist's eyes.

Setting

The Electric Michelangelo begins and ends in Morecambe, England, a resort town on the Irish Sea approximately even with the border between northern and southern Ireland. The story begins just before the outbreak of World War I and Morecambe is portrayed as a popular and prosperous vacation spot that promotes its healthy "soft air" among the northern working classes. In 1933, the protagonist, freed of family and employer, obtains false papers and immigrates to America. Cy Parks settles in Brooklyn and sets up a successful tattoo booth in Coney Island during the years leading up to America's entry into World War II. Cy disappears from 1941 until 1946, when he is wounded in action and reappears in Morecambe and picks up his old professional life. The town's postwar decline is fairly glossed over.

Language and Meaning

The Electric Michelangelo is written in rich, fluid contemporary British English that deserves to be not just read but truly savored. Flirting with poetry, it is richly textured with striking metaphors and similes and non-stop, sometimes rapid-fire allusions to art, literature, history, baseball, world religions, chess and tattooing. The author does not condescend to explain these to the reader, nor does she coddle the reader with the simple-sentence, short-paragraph style so prevalent in contemporary literature. Hall requires the reader to keep up with her, pay attention and remember obscure details that prove important later on. It is well worth the effort. Explanatory flashbacks frequently interrupt narratives, but the return to the narrative is only occasionally disconcerting. All of the characters, even long after their demise, continue being developed to the end of the novel. As the protagonist struggles to unravel the major influences in his life, such as his dead mother, a dead teacher and a would-be lover, the reading can be particularly dense. At the end, no loose ends are left.



Structure

The Electric Michelangelo is divided into two parts. The first, roughly 40 percent of the novel, is broken into three unnumbered chapters: "Bloodlights," "The Kaiser and the Queen of Morecambe," and "Salvaging Renaissance." Together they follow the roughly 30 years that Cy Parks spends growing up in Morecambe, his boyhood in the Bayview Hotel ministering to consumptives, cavorting with friends and a fruitful but infuriating apprenticeship to the town's most renowned tattoo artist, Eliot Riley. Following his master's suicide in 1933, Cy obtains forged papers and sets sail for America, realizing mid-voyage the truth of Riley's observations about people and the nature of the tattooist's trade. Part 2 follows Cy's career in Brooklyn, N.Y. and he returns home at the end. It is divided into three unnumbered chapters, "Babylon in Brooklyn," "The Lady of Many Eyes," and "History's Ink." It develops how the crazed American version of Morecambe, Coney Island, contains the seeds of its own destruction in its pandering to the popular demand for ever greater thrills and shocks. Tattooists stay timelessly outside this march and Cy prospers, but he is involved in the decline through Grace, the performer he grows to love as he tattoos her whole body to prepare her for a new and lucrative career. It is cut short by tragedy and after the climactic revenge taken on the agent of that tragedy, the focus skips forward to the dénouement of the protagonist's postwar years of peace in Morecambe.



Quotes

"Fines could be levied for wandering inside the stipulated ten-foot distance to be kept between the partially clothed sexes. The names of offenders were, of course, to be published in the *Visitor*.

"Reeda Parks snorted loudly when she read about this development in the paper. "'- What will those tiresome old masons ban next, I wonder? Holding hands in the Alhambra picture house? The human body is god-given and sacred, Cyril, nothing of it is vulgar, don't ever be ashamed of it.'" Part 1, Bloodlights, pg. 30.

"Eliot Riley swore he was the first man to try graduated black shading and make it work, though Cy would hear that claim repeated in the booths of Coney Island a decade later. Riley could create an illusion on a flat surface of skin. The things he could do with black ink and shading on flesh were quasi-magical. He was an engraver, like William Blake. He was a sculptor, he was a Bernini, had Cy heard of Bernini? "'No.' "'Well what in God's great name is being taught in the school these days if not the finer aspects of art, sonny?'" Part 1, The Kaiser and the Queen of Morecambe, pg. 69.

"Then Riley released him, stood back, untucked and pulled up his painter's shirt and exposed five inches of gut sporting some of the strangest compositions of ink that Cy had ever seen. He was bright like the skin of a tropical creature, like he was half-lizard. And then the man was gone, arched-legged up the wet, leaf-blown street." Part 1, The Kaiser and the Queen of Morecambe, pg. 77.

"It may have been the electric age of needles but tattooing was as ancient as the mummies being pried from their sarcophaguses in the Egyptian desert and if chiseled ink was good enough for the Pharaohs, it was certainly good enough for Cyril bloody Parks. Then, milliner's needles lashed to a stick, leaving thick rivers of colour, destroying a white leg with black practice. Oh, the bastard was old-school all right. Part 1, The Kaiser and the Queen of Morecambe, pg. 99.

"'One without the other we are all made poorer. Remember that of all of us, Cyril. Remember it of Mr. Riley. He is what he is and he's more a mirror than any man you'll meet. We did our bit, didn't we, love? We did our bit here.' "He did not know which pieces of life she was speaking about. He didn't know but he took her hand as she had once taken his to lead him to the blood-lit window and he wished for a white horse on the shore to see her safely through the mist. Then, after four months of struggling, her death grew and hatched one night from the repeating, withering body and she was gone. Reeda Parks, in all her graceless, earthed and ordinary wisdom, was gone." Part 1, The Kaiser and the Queen of Morecambe, pgs. 106-107.

"He had grown to love the scent of skin. The way it told him something of the person in the chair. Their basic character, their occupation, their choice of artificial perfume spritzed on to that flexing medium with which he worked. The smell of skin was like the



smell of an oil-primer. It signaled the beginning of art." Part 1, Salvaging Renaissance, pgs. 128-129.

"And Cy didn't know if he was weeping for his dead mother, or his dead and dying fathers, or because there was just death in the red room. Or because it was over and his ship had broken free of the rocks and was miraculously still afloat, even though the captain was strung up in the crow's nest with his throat slit wide open and not a soul left on board knew how to sail." Part 1, Salvaging Renaissance, pg. 138.

"Tattooing distresses those it does, lad, because it's as generous as a whore on her birthday. It's human art that you can't peel back off the human or put away in a dresser drawer. It's an unselfish trade, is ours. I'll tell you what it is, it's personal socialism, lad. Everyone's included, everyone gets to look in to a person and share them, like what they see or not. It says here I am, shit and come and all. Nationality, how I like my women, what does it for me. Just like a bullet hole into the guts and bowels. Oh aye and I'll tell you this, lad: a tattoo says more of a fellow looking at it that [sic] it can do of the man who's got it on his back. And people don't like each other half the time, they don't like each other's opinions or lives, they don't want to sympathize with each other, they don't want to share, so what they do is shoot the messenger. You and me. Scapegoats is what we are. What we do is in bad taste, they say, oh, it's not artistic. When what it really is, is people like to keep each other strangers until they've judged. You remember that." Part 1, Salvaging Renaissance, pgs. 148-149.

"Well, I'll be a monkey's uncle! Less donkeys, more horses, Paddy Broadbent!" "Any doubts Cy had, evaporated. There was a horse living with a woman in an apartment in his building and Brooklyn was as hopping crazy as a bucket of painted frogs. "The terrain altered. The lamp dimmed and the horse was gone. The illusion vanished and any strange city secrets went with it. Next door's shadow theatre concluded to no applause, just Cy's slack jaw and his blinking grey eyes, the end of his first foray into the screwy possibilities of this realm." Part 2, Babylon in Brooklyn, pg. 171.

"I expected her to explode! Brought a hat in case of a mess. You ever see a squirrel catch a stray current? Those things 'splode like firecrackers!" "I rode her when I was a child, you know. If I'da known she was a killer elephant I never woulda let my Pappy lift me up on her. When I think how close I musta come to ... well, it don't bear thinkin' about." "Phew-ee! Smells kinda like liver-mush frying." "Cyril Parks put his head in his hands and rubbed his eyes. Then he softly addressed himself and the grizzling crowds. "Lancashire or Yorkshire, sir? Meat or fat?" Part 2, Babylon in Brooklyn, pg. 195.

"Cy stared at her for a moment, not comprehending what she had said and distracted by all that was unrestful and then focused about her. A small gong sounded in his head, neither alarm nor warning nor accompanied by a voice calling an all clear, but heraldic of something, something. She made him want to shake off the haze around his brain and in his present condition, a half bottle of hooch the happier, it was not an easy thing. Evidently his vexation and slowness were easily interpreted. "You live in my building. Second floor. The Electric Michelangelo. Works at Coney, drinks in Vargas, doesn't play in the tournaments. English, northern. Doesn't mind Germans. Doesn't mind drunks.



Doesn't say much, unless he's had whiskey and is arguing with ghosts." Part 2, The Lady of Many Eyes, pg. 219.

"He had a sense that he liked her, very much and not so far away from that prospect was the notion that he could love her, perhaps. He shivered, huddled down further in his bed, listening to the brackish drip of water outside the window. He could love her. Couldn't he? There was a potential." Part 2, The Lady of Many Eyes, pg. 224.

"It always hurts when the war fucks you, but you know it's rubbing on a place in your brain that you can't control so you're going to respond like you want to be fucked by it - maybe you'll beat your wife when you get home or put your fingers in your little daughter, put her up on the table and make her dance for you in her mother's shoes and pearls. And when the war is done fucking it comes, this stinking mess, this juice just like your own and then the children of the war will live in your brain too. Even when you're an old man with your polished medals, all bent over and can't get hard and smelling of piss, sometimes the war will want to come back and fuck your brain in its asshole. All your life. Or until you put your gun up to here and pull the trigger. Yes. Yes." Part 2, The Lady of Many Eyes, pgs. 239-240.

"There were instances when Cy's needle unwittingly delved down into a soul and struck upon meaning, then confidential matter came up, unstemmable as arterial blood or gushing oil and customers confessed the reason behind the art. He caught their stories in a bucket in the shop or booth and mixed it with ink and used the serum to paint translations of the very stories the tellers were haemorrhaging [sic] on to them." Part 2, The Lady of Many Eyes, pg. 260.

"And one day he might go mad from it all. It was a price of the profession Riley had said to him drunk as disaster on the prom that night and creating a fuss. He was a fucking midwife, boy, that was his job. Sharp tools were entrusted to his hands, but the demands of the trade required further skill. For unless brought to him howling and bloody and immediately from the canals of their mothers at birth, there was absolutely no such thing as a blank human canvas." Part 2, The Lady of Many Eyes, pgs. 262-263.

"Otherwise my body already belongs to them. I don't care if it is not thought of as beauty. I don't need it to be. They can think what they like, but what they cannot do is use me with their damn eyes. Not ever again. Don't pretend you don't understand this. Not knocking on my door in the middle of the night with your chess questions for me, all red in the face like a sunburn." Part 2, The Lady of Many Eyes, pg. 272.

"Two marble black eyes on Grace's face suddenly gleamed at him, livid, impersonal and even the tattooed eyes on her body seemed to swivel in his direction like possessed cadaver parts in order to apprehend and intimidate him. "Nie? Nie? Och, Idiota! It will always be about body! Always for us! I don't see a time when it won't." Part 2, The Lady of Many Eyes, pg. 274.

"He had wanted her body altered, put back to how she belonged, restored to grace and femininity, restored to God's blueprint for her kind. As if the acid might have licked off



the tattoos like the tongue of a mother cat, leaving behind a blank white skin to be preserved by the salve. As if she would not be scarred or seared or turned in part to soup before she set. As if any pain during the procedure might return her in penitence to God's original purity of naked cleanness, as if the desecration of her was really a baptism, an annunciation, a rising from her unleavened state." Part 2, History's Ink, pg. 286.



Topics for Discussion

How does Reeda's abortion business affect her son?

How is Riley's teaching methodology useful to his apprentice and how is it counter-productive?

What is the function of the quicksand incident in establishing Cy's personality?

Why is Grace so protective of her past?

What is Riley's fatal flaw?

What is Maximus' function in the story?

What causes the decline of Coney Island? What is its fatal flaw?

How do the apprenticeships of Cy and Nina compare?

How does Nina complete the picture of Cy's personality?

Is tattooing a noble art form?