

Euphoria Study Guide

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Contents

Euphoria Study Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Plot Summary.....	3
Part 1, Chapters 1 - 3.....	5
Part 2, Chapters 4 – 6.....	8
Part 3, Chapters 7 – 9.....	11
Part 4, Chapters 10 – 11.....	14
Part 5, Chapters 12 – 16.....	17
Part 6, Chapters 17 – 21.....	20
Part 7, Chapters 22 – 23.....	23
Part 8, Chapters 24 – 25.....	26
Part 9, Chapters 26 – 28.....	29
Part 10, Chapters 29 – 31.....	32
Characters.....	35
Symbols and Symbolism.....	39
Settings.....	42
Themes and Motifs.....	43
Styles.....	47
Quotes.....	49



Plot Summary

Set in the mid-1930's, "Euphoria" is the story of a love triangle in which the three participants interact on a variety of levels – emotional, intellectual, romantic, and sexual. Complicated, multi-level interactions of power, desire, and intention lead to violence that plays out on both personal and cultural levels, triggering and/or exploring themes related to, and defined by: gender relations, female sexuality and childbearing, obsession, and discovery of personal truth / inner light.

Structurally, the story unfolds in an extended flashback. Narrator and protagonist Andrew Bankson recalls his initial meeting with fellow anthropologists Nell Stone and Schuyler Fenwick (Fen), married to each other but scientifically and intellectually competitive. The suicidal Bankson, despairing because his life and career both seem stalled, becomes happily (and somewhat desperately) involved with them, hoping for (and eventually finding) personal and professional inspiration.

Bankson helps Fen and Nell find a non-civilized / non-Westernized tribe to research. He attempts to leave them to their own work and focus on his own, but finds himself irresistibly drawn to both of them, becoming more and more involved both professionally and personally. Both Fen and Nell are driven by degrees of obsession with aspects of their work: Fen with success and notoriety, and with retrieving a particular artifact or relic that he believes will bring him both; and Nell with excavating truths that she believes are being kept from her. At the same time, both Nell and Fen seem preoccupied both with having a child of their own and with cultural rituals around babies and childbirth.

As Bankson becomes more and more involved with Fen and Nell, they in turn become increasingly preoccupied with pursuing their own goals. At the same time, Nell and Bankson find themselves becoming increasingly attracted to each other, much to the increasing anger and resentment of Fen. That resentment doesn't stop him, however, from engaging with both Bankson and Nell in a passionate, intellectual debate / discussion of the work of another colleague, Helen Benjamin, a past lover of Nell's. That debate results in the development of a theory called The Grid that categorizes and defines characteristics of tribes, genders within those tribes, and individuals of both genders.

Fen experiences the successful completion of The Grid as primarily an accomplishment of Bankson and Nell, and becomes increasingly determined to achieve a success of his own. With that goal in mind, he goes off in pursuit of the artifact he's been pursuing for so long. In his absence, a series of circumstances (including Nell being allowed into a ritual she has long desired to observe) lead Bankson and Nell into an intense sexual encounter, interrupted only by Fen's return with the violently retrieved artifact. The reaction to his return is so intense that Bankson feels that in order to stay alive, the trio has to leave, which they do reluctantly.



Having fled to Australia, Fen immediately starts to take advantage of having taken the artifact and begins to promote himself and his discovery. Nell tells Bankson that she cannot stay with him, and she makes plans to return to New York with Fen. After they leave, Bankson resolves to follow them, but is shocked to learn that on the voyage home, Nell has died and been buried at sea: there are suspicions that Fen was somehow involved, but those suspicions are never proven to be true.

As the narrative draws to a close, Bankson describes what happened to The Grid (its use by the Nazis in World War II to justify their genocidal war-making), his guilt over what happened, and how an exhibition of artifacts of his, Nell's, and Fen's work resulted in an unexpected reconnection with some of the best of his time with Nell.



Part 1, Chapters 1 - 3

Summary

Chapter 1 (third person, past tense, Nell's point of view) – On a day she discovers is Christmas Eve (having lost track of time while doing her anthropological research with an isolated tribe), Nell Stone rides with her husband Fen on a boat that also carries a pair of well dressed, sophisticated couples. As they leave, there is the sound of a splash in the water, and Fen comments that the tribe they have just left (the Mumbanyo) has just thrown another baby into the water. Because of her bad eyes, Nell can't see well enough to determine whether he's correct.

As the journey continues, Nell studies the clean, healthy, well dressed wives the same way as she studied the Mumbanyo. Meanwhile, Fen comments that he'd like to visit Andrew Bankson, an anthropologist who has successfully researched his similarly warlike tribe (the Kiona), and who Nell believes has a professional rivalry with Fen that began when they were at university together. After the boat arrives at the club where Nell and Fen are staying, they are shown to their room, and although Nell wants to relax into the comfort of a real bed, Fen insists on having sex with her, joking that it will bring them their baby. That night at the club's Christmas festivities, Nell observes a very tall white man outside the club. In the final paragraph of the chapter, the narration shifts to the first person, past tense narration of that man: Andrew Bankson.

Chapter 2 (first person, past tense, Bankson narrating) – Bankson describes how, three days before, he had made an attempt to kill himself by walking into a river with his pockets full of heavy stones. He narrates how his thoughts and memories were filled with imagined reactions and commentary from his two brothers, Martin and John, Martin also having killed himself with a gunshot to the head and John having died in World War I. Bankson then narrates how he was rescued by two men who made jokes about the stones in his pockets. He concludes by commenting that once he realized he was “going to be alive for Christmas after all”, he decided to spend the holiday “with the drunks at the Government Station in Angoram”.

Chapter 3 - (first person, past tense, Bankson narrating) Fen greets Bankson happily (triggering Bankson's memories of how much he disliked Fen when they first knew each other), and introduces him to Nell (who, Bankson notes, is wearing an attractive, light blue dress). Bankson invites Fen and Nell to join his table for dinner, his narration revealing how desperate he is for human company; how intrigued he is by how well they seem to have divided their respective research interests; and how dissatisfied he is with his own work. As a fight breaks out between two other guests who have had too much to drink, Bankson impulsively invites Nell and Fen to join him at the site where he's working, promising to find them a tribe to study. Nell comments that she and Fen are scheduled to go to Australia the next day and study a tribe that, she had been assured, has not yet been “claimed”. Bankson, increasingly desperate for human company, promises to find them a similar tribe, his mind running through possibilities as Nell and



Fen go up to their room to collect their things. As they prepare to leave in his canoe (a war canoe he won, he says, by shooting a bear), Bankson senses that Nell and Fen are disappointed at the prospect of having to paddle all night, but that they become happier when he returns with the canoe's motor, which he had hidden from potential thieves. Together, the trio sets off towards Nengai, the settlement at which Bankson is based. It is about to become Christmas Day.

Analysis

As this first section introduces the central characters (Bankson, Nell, and Fen), their relationships, and their goals, it also introduces important motifs, symbols/objects, and themes. It's a very busy, very full few pages.

In terms of motifs (i.e. repeated images), the first, introduced within the first few sentences of narration, is that of babies – specifically, dead babies, as referred to by Fen. The reason why the Mumbanyo as a tribe / culture sacrifice their babies is revealed later in the narrative, but that's an element of background about this motif that is ultimately less important than it being the first of several references to babies having died. The motif of babies and childbirth is developed further at the end of Chapter 1, in which Nell and Fen (perhaps Fen in particular) are portrayed as trying to make a baby of their own. Both aspects of this motif are repeated throughout the narrative. A related motif simultaneously introduced here is that of Fen's near-obsessive determination to get his way over Nell, an aspect of their relationship that occurs, with increasing intensity and violence, throughout the narrative. Meanwhile, one of the more important symbols and objects introduced in this section is Nell's blue dress (which appears here, is not referred to for a great many chapters, and returns to the narrative at its climax and in its ending, when its symbolic value, as related to Bankson and his feelings for Nell, becomes clear. In all these cases, references to both motifs and objects foreshadow references to similar elements later in the book.

In terms of themes, there are several noteworthy points. For example: the above mentioned references to babies is an opening statement, as it were, of the book's thematic interest in female sexuality and childbearing. In a similar way, Fen's attitude towards Nell introduces two themes simultaneously: its exploration of gender roles and relations, and its exploration of obsession, given that later in the narrative, Fen's determination to have power and/or status over Nell manifests here in his practically ordering her to have sex with him. Finally, and very subtly, Nell's comment about "claiming" a tribe for study introduces the novel's thematic consideration of colonial attitudes and actions – specifically, attitudes and choices made by the "enlightened" or "civilized" cultures in relation to those that are defined by those same "enlightened" cultures as "savage" or "uncivilized". "Claiming" a tribe suggests that that tribe, its history and its culture, are property to be seized and controlled. As the narrative unfolds, Fen is clearly portrayed as overtly having this attitude, but Nell has it as well: what's interesting to note is that here as elsewhere in the book, she believes that she doesn't, but the use of the word "claimed" here, and her actions later in the story, give her away.



Other important elements here include the references to Bankson's brothers (whose earlier presence, and eventual absence, from his life play an important role in defining his identity) and, on a more technical level, the introduction of the book's shifting narrative point of view. There is the sense even at this early stage that the book is primarily Bankson's story, but that the experiences of other characters, as revealed from their points of view, are essential for understanding his.

Discussion Question 1

What is the possible metaphoric relationship between Nell's last name (Stone) and the fact that Andrew Bankson uses the word "stones" (as opposed to the word "rocks") to describe what he put in his pockets?

Discussion Question 2

What do you think is the metaphoric / narrative / ironic significance of setting the events of these initial chapters around Christmas?

Discussion Question 3

What point is being made by the narrative suggesting that on the boat journey, Nell is studying the "civilized" passengers in the same way as she studied the "uncivilized" Mumbanyo? What might the narrative be saying about those passengers in particular, and civilization in general?

Vocabulary

lesion, dirge, plantation, missionary, malaria, reflexive, filthy, neuritis, cinch (v.), tributary, brazen, fornicate, dominance, diagonal, envious, traipse, osprey, pidgin, procreate, tawny, kiap, taxidermist, respiratory, buoyant, sallow, marsupial, salve, barmy, goiter, matronly, salacious, hausfrau, plait (n.), asphyxiate, petulant, shorn



Part 2, Chapters 4 – 6

Summary

Chapter 4 (first person, past tense, Bankson narrating) – Bankson narrates his background, family history, and career path, detailing how he was raised by a demanding scientist father (who insisted that his children follow similar career paths to his own) and a soft-willed mother who later became tyrannical and selfish. He also describes his relationships with his two brothers: John, a talented amateur scientist killed during the First World War; and Martin, who became a writer (thereby earning the wrath of their father) and who killed himself in public. Bankson describes being drawn into the field of anthropology; how his first research expedition ended in failure; and how drawn he has been to the Kiona, partly because of the tribe's openness to being studied and partly out of a desire to get away from his mother.

Chapter 5 (first person, past tense, Bankson narrating) – Back in the present and on the trip up the river, Nell sleeps while Fen and Bankson chat, their conversation including (among other things) Fen's request that Bankson ask the Kiona whether they have a sacred totem object that they keep separate from their main settlement. When Bankson asks why he's interested, Fen reveals that the Mumbanyo have a sacred flute that they say is patterned after one possessed by the Kiona, and that he'd like to find out if the original actually exists.

Eventually, the canoe arrives at the Kiona settlement, and Bankson takes Fen and the barely awake Nell up to the house that the tribe had built for him. Inside, Fen settles in and Nell looks around, examining Bankson's research notes and offering unsolicited suggestions as to how he could proceed. Fen (who is Australian) comments on how she's being very American (i.e. assertive and pushy) and Nell apologizes, but Bankson (who is British) says he's grateful for her input. Meanwhile, he fetches out some medicine that he applies to Nell's malarial lesions, and Fen falls asleep.

Conversation between Nell and Bankson continues, however, as they reveal their personal, academic and professional histories to each other (including the story of how Nell and Fen met on board a ship bound for America). Nell discusses her and Fen's most recent research with the Mumbanyo, including their discovery that they drown all their first born children without ritual or ceremony and for no apparent reason. Nell and Bankson then discuss their differing philosophies of anthropological research and study, with Nell referring to the moments of joy that make it worthwhile; and the origins of those philosophies which, for Nell, lie in a childhood experience. Her mother, Nell says, gave birth to a baby (Katie) whom Nell cared for, and took care of, a great deal, but who died before her first birthday without Nell being given a chance to say goodbye. This leads Bankson to reflect on the deaths of his brothers, sudden grief rendering him silent.

Chapter 6 (first person, past tense, Bankson narrating) – The next morning, Bankson is visited by a villager, who tells Bankson that he can't guide him on a scheduled excursion



because his wife is giving birth and having a difficult time. The story leads Bankson to recall his powerfully joyful experience of feeling a baby move inside a tribal woman's pregnant abdomen. Meanwhile, Fen tells Bankson to ask the tribesman about the sacred flute totem, but Bankson stays quiet.

Later, as the trio prepares to go on an expedition to find a tribe for Nell and Fen to study, Nell reveals her bad eyesight to Bankson, and he gives her a pair of Martin's glasses that he saved after his death. The three eventually set out in search of a tribe, with Fen and Nell rejecting the first few possibilities. While visiting one of the rejected tribes, Fen reveals he has a gun, but Nell tells him firmly to keep it hidden. Later, when Fen and Nell are both asleep, Bankson reflects on how intimate they are with each other and how lonely he is. He also has a moment of the joy Nell referred to earlier. Nell wakes up, and they share a moment of playful bonding as they take turns reciting a poem they both know. The next day, Bankson takes them in search of one last tribe that might be a good fit for them: the Tam.

Analysis

The most significant element of this section is the reference found in Quote 6: specifically, to how the concept of euphoria (i.e. an elated, ecstatic experience of joy) relates to the specific circumstances of anthropologists like Bankson and Nell. There is the clear sense that Fen is excluded from this conversation deliberately: even at this relatively early stage in the narrative, it seems evident that his experiences of "euphoria" are triggered by something entirely different. In any case, this is the first of a number of references throughout the narrative that gives the book its title.

Other important elements include several references to objects that have either been referred to previously (giving the references to them here a sense of broader overall significance – that is to the narrative as a whole and its meaning, as opposed to a particular moment), will be referred to later (making the references here foreshadowing), or both. First, there is the reference to the Mumbanyo/Kiana flute totem, which has previously appeared and which, as previously noted, plays a defining role in several narrative circumstances, including the book's climax. A related element, introduced here for the first time, is Fen's gun which, like the flute, disappears from the story for long sections of narrative and then reappears at the book's climax.

Meanwhile, there are several references to babies and childbirth in this section, all of which are part of a continuum or through-line of such appearances of this particular motif. The references here include an explanation of the Mumbanyo baby-killing ritual; the reference to Nell's sister Katie; and the reference to Bankson's experience with the expectant Kiona mother. All these references can be seen as manifestations / facets of the novel's thematic exploration of female sexuality and childbearing, specifically as they relate to Nell and her powerful maternal instincts.

The final points to note about this section relate to developments / deepenings in the Bankson-Nell relationship – specifically, their bonding over Bankson's notes and over



poetry. These incidents mark the first steps along a journey that eventually leads the two researchers into intellectual, emotional, and sexual intimacy.

Discussion Question 1

What are the parallels between Katie, Martin, and John? What are the parallel experiences of their respective siblings? How might those parallels affect the relationship between those siblings?

Discussion Question 2

What do you think is the significance of the three central characters being different nationalities (Fen – Australian; Nell – American; Bankson – British)? Is there, for example, significance in the fact that historically, Britain (as a culture) colonized both America and Australia?

Discussion Question 3

What is the significance of Bankson's relationship with his mother? Which of the novel's themes does it relate to most, and how?

Vocabulary

remnant, geode, phenotype, genetics, piebald, pariah, despotic, benign, exquisite, gumboots, excursion, jubilant, trajectory, placate, appease, anomalous, anesthetize, mantra, deviate, antiquarian, nascent, inevitable, culmination, dormant, phantasmagoria, spate, plethora, caliper, monograph, candor, chicanery, cerebral, flamboyant, serpentine, caterwaul, nocturnal, solace, festoon, epithet, totemic, cavalier, sepsis, iodine, boracic, ointment, affluent, aversion, repulsion, neophyte, vindictive, enamored, condolence, hubris, asinine, voluble, chaperone, skulk, predicament, equilibrium, myopic, incentive, elaborate (adj.), vignette



Part 3, Chapters 7 – 9

Summary

Chapter 7 (first person, past tense, Bankson narrating / Nell's journal) – The first part of this chapter continues Bankson's narration, who describes how one of Nell's journals was presented to him in 1938 by a colleague, Helen Benjamin. His narration refers to how he's accumulated a degree of renown, partly from his book on the Kiona. The rest of the chapter consists of entries from Nell's journal, written in the January immediately following the events in the previous section. She describes the process of settling in with the Tam, including learning some of their language, making friends with a couple of powerful women in the tribe (including an elder named Malun), and learning about the true nature of a powerful, respected man named Xambun, who is deeply missed by the tribe; in whose house Nell and Fen are temporarily staying; and who is Malun's son. She also describes Fen's insistent and loud demands of the men who are building their more permanent house, and how he makes decisions without her about how their household is to be run. The journals also refer to Nell's gratitude for Bankson taking care of her while she was ill, how much she misses him, and how thoughts of him make her shaky.

Chapter 8 (first person, past tense, Bankson narrating) – Bankson struggles to write a letter to his mother that meets several self-imposed conditions, including the determination to not refer to Nell. This last condition he finds particularly impossible to fulfill, connected as he feels to both Nell and Fen, whose powers of observation he particularly admires. He describes his determination to not visit them at the Tam settlement too soon, and his similarly intense desire to reconnect with them, which he says left him no longer willing to kill himself, but no less uncomfortable in his life.

Chapter 9 (Nell's Journal) Nell's journal describes her deepening comfort with and knowledge of the Tam's language; refers in passing to a lesbian relationship she had with Helen (who is portrayed as a demanding, controlling lover); how she (Nell) was forced to make a choice between Helen and Fen; and how she (Nell) feels like what she is really searching for in her work is a place that celebrates freedom of the sort she herself longs for. She also writes about how abandoned she feels by Bankson, and how much she longs for the kind of conversations she had with him. In addition, she writes about how she and Fen are approaching the work in very different ways, with Nell taking on more and more responsibility for more and more research. That research, she writes, has led to the discovery that where the Mumabnyo were very male dominated and paternal, the Tam are very female oriented, with power and influence resting with the tribe's women. There are references in her journal entries to her longing to have a child, her hope that she might recapture the maternal feelings she had for her infant sister Katie, and her intense feelings of both longing and joy as she helped one of the tribes' female members give birth to a child who eventually dies because he wouldn't take to the mother's breast. The chapter concludes with a reference to what Nell sees as Fen's



“insufferable” and angry reactions to small transgressions, even while she (Nell) is still thinking about the baby’s death.

Analysis

The first point to note about this section is stylistic: specifically, its introduction of excerpts from Nell’s journal into the narrative. This is significant because it adds an additional perspective and interpretation to the events, one that in the language used, is clearly differentiated in both style and substance from that of primary narrator Bankson. A related point involves the references to Helen Benjamin, a character who is never actually encountered but whose significance to all three characters - but to Nell in particular - is revealed not just in Chapter 9 but later in the narrative. A second related point is the reference to the year in which Bankson received the journal: 1938 which provides a clear time marking that indicates when the narrative is set. This reference to setting in time develops more and deeper resonances as the narrative continues to unfold.

In addition to Helen Benjamin, two other important characters are introduced here: the strong but silent Malun, who becomes an important ally and confidante for Helen; and the legendary, almost mythic Xambun, whose absence and eventual return play key roles in both the narrative as a whole and in the development of at least one of its themes (in that he is eventually revealed to be victimized by a colonialist mentality).

Thematic developments in this section include a variety of references to the book’s thematic exploration of female sexuality and childbearing. These include the lesbian relationship between Nell and Helen (interesting to note how the name Nell is often a nickname for those named Helen); the references to Nell’s longing for a child; and Nell’s commentary on the role / place of women in both the Mumbanyo and Tam communities. At the same time, the narrative parallels the development of this theme with sketches of Fen’s desire to dominate and control, which in the context of the overall narrative and its themes, can be seen as almost stereotypically male.

Finally, the Bankson-Nell relationship continues its relatively slow, arguably inevitable movement towards their eventual, mutual encounter with multiple levels of intimacy.

Discussion Question 1

Consider this quote from Bankson’s narration of Chapter 7. “After a certain number of sentences, my letters to my mother now became letters to Nell. My mind was stuck in conversation with her and the feeling of talking to her rang through me, disturbed me, woke me up as one wakes from sudden illness in the middle of the night.” What metaphorical illness might this quote refer to? What life experiences, as Bankson has referred to in other narration, might be parallel to an illness? How might Nell be seen as “waking him up” from these other experiences?



Discussion Question 2

What previous experience in Nell's life has parallels with the death of the Tam baby? How do you think that experience effects / defines her reaction here?

Discussion Question 3

What is it about Bankson that Nell longs for? What does he bring to her life and work that she misses so much?

Vocabulary

acclaim, deviant, premonition, lexicon, cant, duplicity, exhilarating, pretext, intransitive, innate, syntax, resonant, commodity, perfunctory, purport, annihilate, morose, nostalgia, algebraic



Part 4, Chapters 10 – 11

Summary

Chapter 10 (Third person, past tense, Nell's point of view) Narration describes how, in the days after the death of the baby, Nell keeps dreaming / thinking about other dead babies she had encountered, including Katie, those in other tribes (including those killed by the Mumbanyo) and her own miscarried child, buried under a banana tree sometime before. Meanwhile, the dead Tam child is buried (with, among other ritual elements, a small flute in its hand), and subsequent conversation between Fen and Nell reveals mutual, long-standing, but silent blame for their not being parents (narration reveals that if she had not miscarried, Nell would have been seven months pregnant).

Eventually, after a shipment of her and Fen's belongings arrives, Nell resumes her research and Fen resumes his efforts to fit in with the tribe, narration revealing that that's much more his focus and interest than Nell's academic, intellectual perspective - which, narration also reveals, is a variation on a belief she had grown up with. "Always in her mind," narration comments, there had been the belief that somewhere on earth there was a better way to live, and that she would find it." As part of her research, Nell plays host to visiting children and herself makes visits (guided by Malun) to the women's part of the settlement. Narration here comments on her growing insight into the power and position of the women, an insight that Fen belittles. At the end of the chapter, Nell surprises the women by visiting their homes in reverse order to her usual routine, and discovers that the women have all gathered in what is usually the last house and have used some sort of intoxicant that Nell can't discern. As she leaves, the women burst out into laughter.

Chapter 11 (First person, past tense, Bankson narrating) – Bankson describes how his increasing desperation to see Nell again finally led him to make the trip up to the Tam village where, to his surprise and relief, he is greeted warmly. He is led through the village to the house built for Fen and Nell, and is surprised to see just how Western its furnishings are – desks, loaded bookshelves, typewriters, couches. He is also surprised to see how full of people (women and children) the house is; how at home Nell seems to be in the crowd, and how well she manages the work she's doing; and how comfortable the Tam seem to be with her. When he is finally noticed, she dismisses the crowd of people and greets him, Bankson getting the sense that she's angry that he's stayed away so long. Her anger seems to dissipate as they play one of the word / idea games she plays to get to know the Tam, their banter similar to how they interacted when reciting the poem together. He then explains why he's there: "I didn't want to miss the euphoria," he says. "You said it happened at the second-month mark." She explains that she's doing really well, and when their house-servant Bani appears (the only member of the tribe who wears clothes – a pair of Fen's discarded shorts), she tells him to prepare lunch while she and Bankson go fetch Fen. As they walk to find him, Bankson has flashes of both dizziness and intense feeling for her, mixed with simultaneous uncertainty and envy of her focus, firmness, and insight. They eventually find Fen in the



company of the male members of the tribe, Bankson noting that Fen has no notebook and is therefore unable to write down his observations. Fen comments pointedly on how long it's been since they've seen Bankson, commenting that while they're on his territory – at that Bankson interrupts, saying it's NOT his territory and then, as dizziness builds in him, revealing how lonely he is and has been, how ineffective he is as a researcher, and how he even failed at trying to kill himself. He then faints.

Analysis

Here again, the first point to note about this section is stylistic: specifically, the narrative choice for Chapter 11 to be written from the same point of view as Chapter 1 – in third person prose from Nell's point of view. Here it's interesting to note that this narration is, in some ways, exclusive of Bankson and his perspective: the emphasis here is solely on Nell, her thoughts and experiences and interpretations of events. Bankson's narration is his interpretation, while the excerpts from Nell's journal, when you think about it, are on some level included because Bankson, as storyteller / narrator and as the person who has access to the journals, on some level is implied to have DECIDED what of Nell's journal to include. The "Nell narrations", for lack of a better term, are presented to the reader without the filter of Bankson, and as such are worth close attention.

All that said, several events in both sections foreshadow important events later in the narrative. Nell's pondering of the unsuccessful visit to the women's section of the community stays with her for much of the narrative to the point where, close to the work's climax, she makes an unexpected return visit and finds out the truth of what's going on. Meanwhile, the revelation of Nell's unsuccessful pregnancy (which has the potential to come as a significant surprise to the reader) foreshadows post-climactic events in the narrative at the same time as developing the book's thematic exploration of female sexuality and childbearing. It also develops the theme of gender roles and relations, given the sense here that both Fen and Nell blame each other for the unsuccessful pregnancy for reasons based in gender and gender-based attitude, rather than for any other reasons. This theme is also developed through the sketched-in detail of Fen's relationship with the male members of the tribe.

This section also contains the book's second reference to the experience of research-related "euphoria", and concludes with both another reference to the colonialism theme and to events / situations (Bankson's illness) that define the action of the following section.

Discussion Question 1

What is the significance of the detail of the baby being buried with a toy flute in its hand? What previously viewed aspects of the novel does this circumstance echo?



Discussion Question 2

Consider the quote referred to here about Nell's determination to find a better way of life. Is this a reference to the novel's thematic focus on colonial attitudes and actions? If yes, what comment of Nell's earlier in the narrative can be seen as related to this comment? If not, what other themes might this comment be seen as relating to?

Discussion Question 3

Which of the book's primary themes can be seen as manifesting in the arrival of Fen and Nell's possessions? In Bankson's reaction to their presence?

Vocabulary

pigment, reticent, desiccated, festoon, ethnographic, ontological, aberration, enigmatic, conspiracy, slalom (v.), chary, rudimentary, depiction, portico, fetid, pungent, vehement, formidable, endeavor, systematic, expletive, hieroglyph, inconspicuous



Part 5, Chapters 12 – 16

Summary

Chapter 12 (Nell's Journal) – In this brief chapter, Nell describes coping with the fever that has struck Bankson, and how she and Fen both took care of him. She realizes that Fen's frequent impatience with her illness and now with Bankson is fear of death and loss (which he, she comments, experienced with his mother). She also thinks that his capacity for caregiving bodes well for his being a father "if that day ever comes." After a brief moment of lucidity, Bankson sinks deeply into delirium, Nell commenting in narration on how Fen kept talking non-stop, perhaps in the thought that listening to him would keep Bankson alive.

Chapter 13 (First person, past tense, Bankson narrating) – This chapter is written in fragmented chunks of differing lengths, reflecting the sorts of consciousness experienced by the ailing Bankson. The first part is written in disjointed imagery that veers back and forth between memory of a traumatizing experience of childhood illness and his experiences of being nursed by Nell and Fen. Later, the writing becomes more coherent as Bankson begins to recover but occasionally still lapses into delirium. In one of his conversations with Fen, the latter urgently tells him about the Mumbanyo's sacred flute which, Fen says, has written language on it and which, he also says, they should steal, take back to England, and make both fame (more than Nell has from her recently published book, "The Children of Kirakira") and fortune (from books and other means of discussing the flute). At another point, Bankson admiringly observes Nell as she works; at another, Fen tells Bankson of his repressed, violent childhood on a farm with an abusive father and willfully ignorant mother (which, he suggests, led him to experience no surprise at the "barbarisms" of the tribes they are studying); at yet another, Fen is shaving Bankson when suddenly he (Fen) leans down and kisses him. Eventually Bankson's fever breaks, and he begins to eat more regularly. As the chapter ends Bankson, Nell, and Fen lie together on Bankson's bed talking. As Fen goes outside to relieve himself, Bankson comments that his and Nell's hands were "a few inches apart on the warm spot where Fen's body had been."

Chapter 14 (Nell's Journal) – This section of the journal begins two days after Bankson's departure. Nell comments on how much more productive the conversations she has with Fen are when Bankson is involved. She describes an outing that she and Fen took with Bankson that led them to an isolated, moonlit lake, and how their conversation turned to death and ways of remembering the dead (including Bankson's brother John, whose complete body was never found). This brief chapter concludes with Nell calling their relationship "a bit of a dance", and suggesting that both she and Fen might be "a little in love with Andrew Bankson."

Chapter 15 (First person, past tense, Bankson narrating) When he arrives back at his camp, and after cutting off the flow of news from one of the tribesmen (which includes references to a fight over the paternity of a baby), Bankson reads a note from a woman



named Bett, who asks him to come see her. Bankson comments in narration that his interest in what appears to be their sexual relationship has cooled since he met Nell, but that he'll go anyway. The next day he travels to where Bett and her boat are currently moored; has sex with her that, he says, doesn't even come close to banishing his thoughts of Nell; lies about what he was doing for the past few weeks; has a good dinner and more sex; and then returns to the Kioina settlement the next day.

Chapter 16 (First person, past tense, Bankson narrating) In this single-page chapter, Bankson describes how well his work goes for a while – he was, he says, “having [his] own small euphoria.” He makes plans to continue working and then leave a few months later, but then receives a note from Nell.

Analysis

On a stylistic level, this section is notable for the way in which its fragmented sentence structure and imagery evoke Bankson's experience of fever and delirium. The reader is very much in his mind with him as he slips in and out of reality, in and out of dream, and in and out of imagination. Other important elements related to Bankson's illness include Fen's description of the flute; Fen's apparent competitiveness with Nell; Fen's discussion of his relationship with his mother; and Fen's unexpected kissing of Bankson. The reader may be tempted to take all of these events at face value: in other words, to perceive them as actually happening. It must be remembered, however, that as he experiences all of them, Bankson is still delirious, and some of these incidents may not have actually taken place.

As Bankson recovers, other important elements emerge: developments in the Fen-Nel-Bankson triangle (the image of the three of them on the bed together is simultaneously evocative, sensual, and tantalizing); the references to babies and childbirth (including Nell's wistful contemplation on Fen's potential as a father, and the glancing encounter Bankson has with issues of a baby's parentage; the reference to Nell's book and its popular success, which is a powerful trigger for Fen's resentment and his determination to gain status over her; and the brief but vivid appearance of Bett, whose influence on Bankson at first glance appears minimal, but later in the narrative can be seen, in hindsight, as actually being a significant factor in the deepening of his emotional relationship with Nell. This deepening is further foreshadowed in Nell's journal (which refers to the various levels upon which she is being stimulated by Bankson). Finally, there is another usage of the term and concept of “euphoria”, which suggests that as Bankson, inspired by Nell, moves more deeply into himself and his truths, his capacity to move more deeply into the lives and truths of the peoples he is studying also deepens. He is continuing his thematically significant movement from inner darkness towards a connection with inner light.



Discussion Question 1

Consider and discuss each of the Fen-related experiences Bankson has while he's delirious. Which are likely to be true, and which are likely to be fantasies or delusions? Consider Bankson's personal history and present attitudes, needs, and drives. How might what he remembers influence or define each of these encounters with Fen?

Discussion Question 2

Discuss the ways in which comments made by Fen during his "conversations" with Bankson, whether they are the product of Bankson's delirium or not, reflect various of the narrative's themes.

Discussion Question 3

Why is the character of Bett significant? What qualities does she add to the story in general, and to Bankson's story in particular?

Vocabulary

vantage, elixir, calabash, lucid, profuse, delirious, whorl, febrile, receptacle, lucid, tendentious, accrue, fluorescent, pliant, inchoate, prefect, diurnal



Part 6, Chapters 17 – 21

Summary

Chapter 17 (Third person, past tense, Nell's perspective) – Nell and Fen's sleep is interrupted by sudden loud shouts and cries from the villagers. When they investigate, they find the village in a wild, hysterical uproar. As she and Fen fight their way through the crowd to get to the event at the heart of the excitement, Nell hopes that she isn't going to encounter another dead baby. Instead, she finds Malun cradling a man in her arms: the whipped, scarred, and fainting Xambun, who (as Nell wrote in her note to Bankson) has returned.

Chapter 18 (Third person, past tense, Nell's perspective) – On the third night of celebrations marking Xambun's return Fen, who has been participating as though he was himself a member of the tribe (including taking their hallucinogens) interrupts Nell at her work, rants about how her typewriter is the sound of her thoughts, and throws it on the floor, angry and violent. He then rejoins the celebratory dancing. Nell recalls how she was once advised to never be alone with her husband, but to always have a "brother" with her". She reflects that she could have used one, both in the recent moment and during her and Fen's time with the Mumbanyo, reflecting further that if she HAD had a brother then, she might also have a baby. A few nights later, as the dance continues and the men (including Fen) become increasingly intoxicated by hallucinogens, dance, and the women's attention, Nell tries to work, but finds herself distracted by the glow of a cigarette. When she investigates, she discovers Xambun, and realizes she has a great opportunity to get some additional perspective. Before she can approach him, he tells her to go away ... in English.

Chapter 19 (Nell's Journal) Nell describes the continuing, deepening, intensifying celebration; how much she mistrusts crowds, and their collective consciousness; how Malun has promised her a chance to interview her son; and how she (Nell) misses Bankson, whose perspective and observations she feels would be useful.

Chapter 20 (First person, past tense, Bankson narrating) – Bankson arrives at the Tam settlement in the quiet aftermath of the celebration's ending. Nell greets him happily, but Fen seems somewhat indifferent, even when Bankson produces the mail he has brought for them – hundreds of pieces for Nell, maybe a dozen for Fen, who angrily takes his outside. Nell, meanwhile, sorts hers carefully and seems, Bankson comments in narration, to be looking for something. Later, Fen reveals that she was probably looking for a letter from Helen who, Fen thinks, Nell should steer clear of. Bankson doesn't tell him that there's a parcel from Helen in the mail. Meanwhile, Fen takes Bankson to the male enclave in the village, the entrance to which is carved to resemble female genitalia.

Chapter 21 (First person, past tense, Bankson narrating) – After Fen and Bankson return to the house, Nell opens the package from Helen and reads aloud a letter asking



them for their opinions on the enclosed manuscript. Fen, Nell, and Bankson take turns reading Helen's book aloud. Bankson's narration describes how they were all moved and stimulated, emotionally and intellectually, by her ideas and her passion. They finally go to bed, their minds full of what they just read. The next morning, Bankson wakes to find Fen writing intensely, and then watches as Fen leaves the instant he hears Nell stirring. Nell and Bankson discuss Helen's book further, Nell revealing that the manuscript's section on a tribe called the Dobu is based entirely on material Helen got from Fen, the only anthropologist to ever study that particular tribe. Fen returns, initially unhappy to see them together but then giving them more information about the Dobu. As Nell goes out to visit the women, Fen and Bankson observe a male initiation ritual, and then rejoin Nell, who again indicates that she wants to interview Xambun right away, but Fen convinces her to give him more time.

Analysis

This section marks the entry of two powerful influences into the story, and into the lives of the three central characters. The first new influence is the presence of Xambun, which creates a wild, violent energy through which the characters have to navigate and which they can't help but absorb (this is particularly true of Fen who, as Nell comments in her narration, seems to want to BE a native and not just study them). Here it's important to note that developments in the story brought about by Xambun's return have important thematic resonance: Nell's discoveries of how he has been changed and/or damaged by his experiences suggest that those experiences have been defined by western culture and whites (i.e. his habit of smoking, his speaking English), which in turn manifest the book's thematic interest in colonial attitudes and actions. At the same time, her hunger for further discoveries, further conversation leads her into a kind of obsession that clearly evokes the book's thematic interest in THAT experience.

The second influence that enters the story in this section is Helen – or, more specifically, her manuscript. Even though she and her presence in Fen and Nell's life have been referred to previously, this is the first occasion that her influence becomes both immediate and intellectual, as well as emotional. The point is not made to suggest that her influence here is NOT emotional, or does not have an emotional element: on the contrary, there is the clear sense that when it comes to Helen, the emotional and intellectual effects are closely intertwined. Meanwhile, the appearance of the manuscript and the characters' various reactions to it foreshadow developments in the following section that highlight just how intensely and passionately the three characters regard Helen's ideas, and the interjection of those ideas into their lives.

Other important elements in this section include yet another reappearance of the dead baby motif (which is starting to foreshadow the idea of the death of hope or possibility in the lives and experiences of the three main characters; the vivid, and ironic, description of the entry way into the men's quarters; and another eruption of violence from Fen. This functions on several levels: as a thematic evocation of the tension between inner darkness (i.e. his resentment of Nell) and inner light (his clear love and desire for her); as a metaphoric exploration of the novel's thematic interest in gender roles (the



destruction of the typewriter can be seen as another evocation of Fen's masculine desire to dominate the primary female in his life); and as a foreshadowing of future acts of violence (particularly the climax) involving, or triggered by, Fen.

Discussion Question 1

Consider this quote from Bankson's narration of the moment when Helen's manuscript is revealed. "The silence was not still – it was the opposite of stillness. As if the three of them, Nell, Fen, and Helen, were having a conversation I couldn't hear." What does this suggest about the relationship between the three characters (Nell – Fen – Helen)? Given what the narrative has previously revealed about their relationship, what might that unspoken conversation actually be about?

Discussion Question 2

In what ways do the emotional aspects of the central romantic triangle (Bankson, Nell, Fen) evolve and deepen in this section? What actions suggest growing intimacy, of any sort?

Discussion Question 3

How do you think the fact that Helen used Fen's research on the Dobu affects Fen? How do you Fen's reactions affect his relationships with Nell and Bankson?

Vocabulary

barrage, feline, turmoil, slather, rancid, hallucinogen, putrid, fluidity, discernible, adornment, informant, copulation, cognition, deplete, impeccable, juniper, laburnum, indentured, tenet, iconoclasm, maladjustment, deviant, relativism, glyph, turmeric, contort, totemic



Part 7, Chapters 22 – 23

Summary

Chapter 22 contains references to the post-World War II present in which Bankson is writing; refers to “The Grid”, which at this point seems to be an analytical/research technique developed by Bankson; and questions whether The Grid, or any other subsequent events, would have happened if Bankson had returned to the Kiona instead of staying with Nell, Fen, and the Tam.

The focus of the chapter then shifts to the past, and the third night of Bankson’s second stay with Nell and Fen. Their concentrated, three-way editing and consideration of Helen’s book leads them to an intense, excited, hours-and-days long conversation during which they develop The Grid, a direction-based chart of attitudes, values, beliefs, and actions that they at first use to define the inter-relationships of the various tribes they’ve been studying, then use to define gender relationships within tribes, and then, after more marathon conversation, use to chart individuals and THEIR interrelationships (including their respective families and lovers). At one point in this phase of the conversation, an argument breaks out between the jealous Fen (who resents Nell’s public success and who has been withholding his research) and the similarly resentful Nell (who is desperate to complete her research with Fen’s information). The argument subsides quickly, and the conversation continues. Later, Fen goes outside to relieve himself. At that moment, conversation between Nell and Bankson reveals that Nell had a sexual affair with the possessive Helen that broke off after she (Nell) began her relationship with Fen. Nell also reveals that the tension between her, Fen, and Helen (both of whom were quite possessive and demanding) led her (Nell) to understand that possessiveness was not a gender-related trait, and that she (Nell) believed in having the freedom to explore and experiment with sexuality and relationships.

Later in the marathon conversation, the trio places themselves on The Grid – Nell and Bankson in the sensitive south, Fen in the aggressive north – which leads to a few moments of tension as Fen reacts negatively, and then even more tension as, in anger, Fen reveals that Nell is expecting a baby. Bankson, who has been very aware of the emerging intellectual and emotional connection between himself and Nell (a connection of which Fen also seems to be aware as well), offers a stiff congratulations and then goes for a walk. While out on his walk, he sees a man and a woman talking, and thinks the man – just because of his posture and physical relationship with the woman – is white. A moment later, the man comes towards him, but stops, and Bankson realizes it’s Xambun, and has the idea that Fen has been talking to Xambun in the way that Nell has been wanting to do.

Bankson returns to the house, and overhears Fen and Nell arguing about their relationship, with Fen saying he will never be one of Nell’s “cast-offs”. Shortly after Bankson goes into the house Nell goes to bed, Bankson commenting in narration how familiar her body is to him and how eager he is for her. He then says to Fen, who has



been watching him watch Nell, that he (Bankson) needs to go back to the Kiona. Fen begs him to stay, saying that both he and Nell need him. Bankson commented that “stupidly, selfishly” he agreed.

Chapter 23 (Nell’s Journal) Nell writes that at the same time as the trio is uncovering ideas about the cultures they are studying, they are also uncovering truths about themselves and their relationships ... as though she is “saying – and hearing – the first wholly honest words of [her] life.”

Analysis

This section is the most emotionally and intellectually intense of the book so far. As Bankson, Nell, and Fen participate in what the narrative portrays as almost an orgy of ideas, intellectual passion, and emotional volatility, the complex relationships between them simultaneously deepen and become both more violent and more needful.

Almost all of the book’s themes are evoked in this section. All three characters, as individuals and as a trio, experience a simultaneous deepening of inner light (in the form of intellectual and emotional stimulation) and inner dark (in the form of resentment, recrimination, and over-sensitivity). Gender roles and relations are explored both in the development of The Grid and in the trio’s personal reactions to the ideas it espouses and defines. Female sexuality is also explored within the context of conversation about The Grid, while the theme of childbearing and the “baby” motif emerges in Fen’s bitter, weapon-like announcement of Nell’s pregnancy. Colonial attitudes and actions are evoked in the way the tribes that have studied, their cultures and ways, are treated as tools and things to be exploited rather than as actual ways of living. Finally, the intensity of what these characters go through is clearly and vividly portrayed as a kind of temporary obsession, taking all three of them over completely and causing them to behave in notably extreme ways.

Meanwhile, there are significant pieces of new information in this section: Nell and Helen’s affair (which can be seen as triggering Fen’s resentments and anger even more); Nell’s pregnancy (which ups the tension within the trio significantly); and Bankson’s sense that in his posture and movement, Xambun has become more like a white man than the tribesman. Here again, the narrative evokes its thematic interest in colonial actions and attitudes (such actions can be seen here as having changed the once-heroic Xambun into something he’s not in the way that white / European cultures have been doing with non-white cultures for centuries).

Other important aspects in this section include the references to The Grid (which foreshadow important ways in which The Grid influences character and situation later in the narrative) and a further deepening of the Nell- Bankson connection, which continues to foreshadow the eventual result of that connection in future chapters.



Discussion Question 1

What do you think is the metaphorical significance of the revelation of Nell's pregnancy coming in the same chapter as the development of The Grid? What are the parallels between the two events? What are the differences?

Discussion Question 2

In what ways might Fen's announcement of Nell's pregnancy be considered similar to the handling of a weapon? Who might it be intended to hurt, and why?

Discussion Question 3

Why does Nell feel like she is being honest for the first time in her life? What does this suggest about her other experiences – specifically, those she has -or has had - with Fen?

Vocabulary

marginalia, align, quadrant, dominance, omission, polygamy, carapace, extrapolate



Part 8, Chapters 24 – 25

Summary

Chapter 24 (First person, past tense, Bankson's narration) – Bankson wakes to the sound of weeping: Nell is comforting the crying girl whom Bankson saw with Xambun the night before. The girl reveals that Xambun and Fen have taken Bankson's canoe and gone in search of the Mumbanyo flute. Bankson offers to go after them, but Nell says it would make the situation worse, adding that Fen has his gun and that she's more worried about the tribespeople than about Fen. Later, after they've spent time typing together (Bankson using Fen's desk) and comparing writing styles (Bankson finding he remembers more if he writes with emotion and sense memory like Nell), they are visited (as usual) by the children with whom Nell plays and simultaneously studies, Bankson commenting in narration on his admiration for her methods. He makes the same point a little later, after watching Nell draw a story (about men and women wearing each other's garments and ornaments during a ritual) from an upset elderly man, who is deeply relieved to hear from Bankson, via Nell's interpretation, that such things happen in other tribes. Bankson also visits the men's meeting room, where he learns that the men of the tribe are glad that Xambun has gone: he has, they say, left his spirit behind and has gone to retrieve it.

That evening, as a thunderstorm threatens, Bankson and Nell go out and make up their own ritual to call the rain, which arrives but soon gets too strong for them to remain outside. They go back into the house, their intellectually intimate conversation and eventual sharing of poetry leading Bankson to increasingly longing contemplations of Nell and her body, and of how wrong it would be for him to do anything about his intense attraction to her. "What would it have altered to have kissed her then, that night? Everything. Nothing. Impossible to know."

Chapter 25 (First person, past tense, Bankson's narration) The next day, with Fen still missing, Nell tells Bankson that the female ritual she was barred from earlier (Chapter 10) is taking place again that day, and she is determined to find out what goes on. Wearing her blue dress (the one, Bankson comments, that she was wearing when they first met) and leaving Bankson alone in the house, she goes off in search of Malun. Bankson spends the day looking through Nell and Fen's books, and then is taken fishing. Eventually, Nell returns, and reveals what happened: she was welcomed into a female bonding ritual that involved, among other things, massage and lesbian sexual intercourse. Before she can complete her story, however, the sexual tension between her and Bankson erupts, and they spend the night making love.

The next morning, their drowsy waking is interrupted by Bani bringing news that Fen and Xambun are returning. They go down to the shore of the lake, Bankson commenting in narration on his anger that his last few moments with Nell have been interrupted. Eventually, as Bankson's canoe comes closer, they and the tribespeople realize that Xambun is dead, that Fen is paddling, and that there's a large package in



the canoe as well. As the tribespeople collect Xambun's body and loudly mourn his death, Fen reveals that the long-sought flute is in the package, and that he and Xambun were ambushed. The tribespeople try to collect the flute, but Fen is determined to not let them have it. Bankson tries to convince him that if he doesn't their lives are in danger, but Fen tells him to stay out of it. Bankson then tries to convince Nell to go, but she refuses. "These are my people," she tells him. Later, Fen tries to tell Bankson and Nell that the flute was a gift given to him by the Mumbanyo chief, but neither of them believes him, Bankson finally convincing them it's time to leave. They pack as much as they can into Bankson's canoe, Bankson making sure Nell has her (Martin's) glasses. As they go, Nell calls farewells to all the children crying out to her. The trio manages to hitch a ride on a larger boat, on which Fen makes arrangements for his and Nell's things to be collected. Bankson comments in narration on his determination to go with Fen and Nell to Australia (their next scheduled stop), and tells Nell he'll go with her to America if she'll let him.

Analysis

Two extremely significant events take place in this section. The first is the consummation of the relationship between Bankson and Nell, the point at which they finally give in to the emotional, intellectual, and physical attractions they've both been struggling with over the course of the narrative. There are several important things to note about the event and the immediate sequence of events leading up to it: the reference to the blue dress (which has a history in the narrative and which plays a key point in its final moments); Nell's experience with the women of the tribe (an experience she at first failed to penetrate - Chapter 10 – and which has an effect on her that she did not expect); and, perhaps most notably, the fact that Nell is pregnant with Fen's child at the time she is having sex with Bankson. The irony here is significant: the child she has longed for for so long was fathered by a man for whom she has less and less respect and affection, while the man who fulfills her emotionally and intellectually is unable to give her what she seems to want in terms of a child simply because someone else has already done so. Those points aside, it's also important to note how this event embodies several themes: Bankson's obsession with Nell has achieved its goal; Nell finally feels fully free to express her female sexuality, a situation complicated (as noted above) by her pregnancy; and, for both of them, the experience is one of being fulfilled by an inner light, an aspect of the situation that contrasts powerfully with the second major event: the return of Fen with the totem, and the death of Xambun.

These simultaneous incidents clearly form the book's narrative and thematic climax. In terms of the former, the various tensions between the characters, between the characters and their situation, and between the cultures involved in their risky interactions, reach their highest point in the discovery of what Fen has done, and of the death that resulted. In terms of the latter, these events mark the fulfillment of Fen's obsession with the flute, which is arguably also his ultimate embracing of his inner darkness (i.e. his greed and drive for power and status) and of his maleness-grounded gender positioning. At the same time, the death of the "tribesman / indigenous citizen" (Xambun) as the result of the cumulative effects of colonial attitudes and actions. These



two events, regarded together, can be seen as the ultimate expression of tensions between the genders, manifest in tensions between people and their individual goals and needs. In other words, the general / archetypal is put into action by the specific and personal.

Other noteworthy elements in this section: the story of the elderly tribesman is another manifestation of the book's thematic interest in gender roles; Fen's gun makes only its second appearance in the narrative, but one that fulfills the foreshadowing of violence that accompanied its first appearance; and Nell's reluctance to leave the Tam because they are "her people".

Discussion Question 1

Given the other events of this section and the history of relationship between the three central characters, what is the metaphoric significance of Bankson using Fen's typewriter to record his notes?

Discussion Question 2

Again given the events in this section, and its history within the narrative, what is the symbolic or metaphoric relationship of Nell's blue dress?

Discussion Question 3

What does Nell mean when she says "These are my people." Does she say it because she feels a connection to them, or does she say it from a place of colonialist attitude (i.e. they're her property)?

Vocabulary

inertia, luxuriate, glaucoma, incredulity, adjacent, pungent, lacerate, amidships, boisterous, funereal, affix, tumult, incoherent,



Part 9, Chapters 26 – 28

Summary

Chapter 26 (First person, past tense, Bankson's narration) Upon their arrival in Australia, Bankson finds civilization (clothes, food, capitalism, conversation, traffic) difficult adjust to. Fen, meanwhile, quickly cleans himself up and arranges for himself, Bankson, and Nell to be the guests at a dinner given in their honor by a prominent anthropologist (Claire Lynes). During the party, an at-ease Fen initiates conversations about the flute, garnering praise and information about opportunities to tell its story. At one point, in a moment of quiet, Nell weeps for what happened to Xambun and Bankson comforts her, asking her to return to the Kiona with him. She says she loves him which, he says, means she won't.

After returning to their hotel, Nell goes to bed while Fen talks with Bankson in his (Fen's) room. Bankson refuses the chance to see the flute, and Fen tries to convince him that it really was given as a gift, and that the only reason things got violent was because it was the subject of a clan dispute that had nothing to do with him. He also suggests that Xambun wanted to die, revealing that at one point, Xambun held his gun and seemed to want to use it on himself, and later, taunted the attacking tribespeople. Fen also tries to explain his need to get the flute, saying that as a man, he had to have power and status equal to that of Nell, his woman.

Shortly after that, Bankson leaves and tries to sleep, but is disturbed by a confrontation and a loud thump coming from the room above him – Nell's room. He goes up to find out what's going on, and discovers that Nell and Fen have been arguing over Nell's desire to warn the police about potential tribal warfare. Bankson asks what the thump was, and Fen tells him Nell's duffel bag fell. The next morning, the day that Nell and Fen are due to leave for America, Bankson finds a hotel laundry bag outside his door. It contains several items (including the blue dress) that Nell wants returned to special friends in the Tam community. There is also a letter, in which Nell asks him to let her go: she has to "try and fix what [she] can". Bankson helps Nell and Fen get their things onto their boat, and watches as they themselves get on board.

Chapter 27 (First person, past tense, Bankson's narration) Bankson returns first to the Kiona, who welcome him into the tribal ritual (the Wai) that he had long hoped to be able to see. As he observes, he notices much more about the interplay / reversals of the genders, more of the history, and more of the humor than he imagined he would. Later, he and a guide return to the Tam settlement, where he learns that he's not welcome, and that the community is still in mourning for Xambun. He convinces them to let him leave Nell's gifts for her special friends, and they are received with mixed reactions: Malun is particularly angry, but becomes calmer when she receives the gift of Nell's shoes. As Bankson is leaving, Bani comes up to him and comments that "Fen is a bad man". Bankson then leaves, revealing in his narration that he has plans to go straight to New York from Sydney.



Chapter 28 (Nell's journal) In this brief chapter, written on board the boat for New York, Nell reveals that she has left Fen and is returning to Sydney, implying that from there she is going back to her work. References to how much she loves, and feels connected to, a man are unclear as to whether she's talking about Bankson or Fen.

Analysis

Both these chapters and those in the following, final section of the book make up its falling action, or denouement. In the aftermath of the climactic events of the previous section (the sexual consummation of the Bankson-Nell relationship; the return of Fen with the flute; the death of Xambun), the narrative momentum of the story slips into lower gear as the characters begin their physical, emotional, and intellectual recovery from the intense, challenging, and transforming events that have gone before. This is not to say that nothing new, or of import, happens in this section: Nell's seemingly final separation from Bankson, and what might be her change of heart at the end of Chapter 28; the reappearance of the blue dress; the introduction of Claire lynes (who plays a significant role in the action of the final section); and, above all, the implied reappearance of the violent streak in the Nell-Fen relationship (was it REALLY her duffle bag falling that Bankson heard?) are all important developments, but in the overall scheme of the narrative and its themes, they are relatively less significant.

Also in this section, important elements include Bankson's finally being allowed to observe the community's ritual (which, as a result of its gender reversals, can be seen as yet another exploration of the narrative's thematic interest in gender roles / relations); and his decision to join Nell and Fen in New York, which could be seen as functioning on two levels: as a darkening of his joyful connection with Nell into an obsession, or as a reaching for the inner light that he is experiencing for the first time as the result of that connection.

Worthy of particular attention is Fen's attempt to justify his actions in taking the flute – specifically, in his contention that as a man, he has the right to status over Nell (the woman). This clearly portrays him as a sexist, a manifestation of the book's thematic interest in gender tensions and relations. It could also be argued that there is a tie-in here between Fen's gender attitudes and his colonialism-defined attitudes towards the flute, and the tribe from which he took it, the other tribes with which he's interacted. On just about all levels, Fen reveals himself in this section as a dominator, a controller, someone obsessed with power and status.

Finally, there is the indirect question posed at the end of this final entry from Nell's journal – Fen or Bankson?

Discussion Question 1

Is Fen's story about what happened in the hotel room between him and Nell believable? Why or why not?



Discussion Question 2

What is the most likely reason that Nell decides to leave with Fen rather than stay with Bankson? What aspects of Fen's character and/or their relationship are factors in her choice /decision?

Discussion Question 3

Who is Nell referring to in the final comments of her journal, Fen or Bankson? Explain your answer.

Vocabulary

inure, cellophane, amoral, recrimination, exuberant, aphasic, delusion, play, harangue, bawdy, elicit



Part 10, Chapters 29 – 31

Summary

Chapter 29 (First person, past tense – Bankson’s narration) As Bankson waits for a boat to take him to New York (telling his mother, in a letter, he won’t be stopping long at home), he visits the places in Sydney that he visited with Fen and Nell. He has a chance encounter with one of the guests from the dinner party he attended with them, who tells him that both Nell and her baby had died from a hemorrhage. He visits Claire lynes for confirmation, and she tells him that Fen insisted that Nell’s body be buried at sea, which has led to an investigation of him and his behavior. Thoughts of Nell telling him about their first meeting triggered by this news lead Bankson to break down in tears, Claire attempting to comfort him as much as possible.

Chapter 30 – (First person, past tense – Bankson’s narration) On his way to New York, Bankson broods and grieves for Nell, narration describing his recollection of a Mumbanyo legend about a man who wanted to kill the moon after his (the man’s) wife told him that all women were married to the moon. After the man’s attempts, the legend goes, the moon laughed at him and said that he was the first husband for all women. The man, the legend concludes, went back to his wife and resumed his life.

Meanwhile, Bankson discovers the trio’s notes about The Grid in his duffle bag, surprised because he had been convinced he didn’t have them. He quickly and intensely writes a paper based on those notes, feeling the influences of Nell and Fen in the room with him and signing their names to the finished work. He describes how the paper was quickly published; how it quickly became a popular tool for classroom work; how it was used by Nazis in World War II to justify their practices of racial purity; and how, in an effort to redeem himself for writing a work that caused so many deaths, his actions resulted instead in many other deaths, including the complete annihilation of a single tribe. When the boat makes its stop in England, he is greeted by his weeping, grateful mother, narration describing his decision to not continue to New York but, instead, to stay in England.

Chapter 31 (First person, past tense – Bankson’s narration) This chapter is again written from Bankson’s post-war, “several years later” perspective. Bankson describes his only eventual trip to New York – to view an anthropological exhibit that contains several elements that refer to him. He describes the exhibit’s initial elements (which include a copy of Nell’s book, “The Children of Kirakira”), and then comments on his surprise when he discovers that a substantial part of the exhibition includes elements of the work he, Nell, and Fen did on the tribes of the Sepik River. The exhibition includes a copy of the magazine in which the monograph on The Grid was published, the pages of the magazine ripped into shreds, as requested by Bankson, in an attempt to symbolically apologize for how its ideas were used by the Nazis. Bankson’s narration also refers to Fen’s mysterious, years-long disappearance; to photographs of the three of them also included in the exhibition; and to its final piece, a Tam death mask (i.e. mask taken from



the body of the recently dead), which has, at the center of a kind of crown, “only a button ... only a bit of thread ... from a wrinkled blue dress I had once undone.”

Analysis

The narrative’s denouement / falling action continues and reaches its conclusion in this section, as it revisits some relationships that have been absent from the narrative for a while (i.e. Bankson and his mother); references one more time the “dead babies” motif (only this time, in a much more personal, subjective, intimate context – there is the sense that all the previous references to such babies have been foreshadowings and/or precursors for this particular dead baby); and reveals Nell’s death, albeit with deliberate ambiguity.

Also significant in this section: Bankson’s discovery of The Grid notes and what eventually happened to them; and the second-hand retelling of the man vs. moon legend. There are a few points to note here. The first is that for centuries legend, culture, philosophy, and religion have linked the monthly female menstrual cycle with the monthly phases of the moon – and, in some cases, the waxing (expanding) of the moon with the waxing (expanding) belly of a pregnant woman. The story here, in short, seems clearly intended to manifest the novel’s thematic exploration of female sexuality and childbearing, again in contrasting juxtaposition to the implied act of violence Nell (perhaps) experienced in the moment of her death, and also the acts of violence referred to in the paragraphs following – specifically, the acts of genocidal violence perpetrated by the Nazis in response to the ideas contained in The Grid.

The book’s final moments – specifically, its reference back to Nell’s blue dress – seems to metaphorically suggest, perhaps romantically, that the connection experienced by Nell and Bankson is transcendent of suffering and death. The thematic implication is this: that the inner light that Nell and Bankson each encountered, in each other and in themselves, can/will survive any forms of inner/outer darkness and violence they may otherwise encounter.

Discussion Question 1

What do you think happened to Nell? Is Fen telling the truth about what happened? Or is he concealing the truth? What might his disappearance suggest about what happened that night?

Discussion Question 2

How do you think the notes for The Grid got into Bankson’s duffle bag?



Discussion Question 3

What is your opinion of Bankson's reaction to how The Grid was used by the Nazis? Was it justified? Appropriate? An over-reaction? Explain your answer.

Vocabulary

aptitude, palaver, enormity, hygiene, monograph, diorama, placard, serendipity, entreaty



Characters

Andrew Bankson

Andrew Bankson is one of the book's central characters – more specifically, one side of the narrative's central romantic triangle. He is portrayed as being in his late twenties / early thirties, deeply troubled as the story begins (he has just been pulled back from the brink of an attempted suicide), and desperate to find some kind of meaning in his life, either professional or personal. He finds both in the form of his relationships with Nell and Fen, but particularly with Nell: like both these other characters, Bankson (as he is referred to throughout the narrative) is an anthropologist.

Bankson is also the book's primary narrator, meaning that the story, its events, and the meaning of those events are defined primarily from his perspective. That perspective has several elements, including his family circumstances (i.e. being the youngest child of a demanding father and complicated mother, with two tragically deceased older siblings) and his cultural origin (i.e. British, a culture known – albeit perhaps stereotypically – for, among other things, colonialism and emotional restraint bordering on repression). In terms of his professional circumstances, he feels himself inferior to his colleagues (including, at first, Nell and Fen, by whom he is eventually inspired) and is in the process of accepting that he is never going to meet their standards when the story begins.

Bankson's journey of transformation over the course of the narrative is similarly defined by all these circumstances, as he breaks free from the rules and demands imposed upon him by his father; discovers he deserves more than the neglect and manipulation he experienced at the hands of his mother; moves beyond the grief and hopelessness he experienced as the result of the deaths of his two older brothers; and finds both inspiration and meaning in his work as the result of working with / learning from Fen and Nell. What's interesting to note here is that he learns about his own moral values as a result of working with Fen (that is: he learns from the amoral Fen what he – Bankson – does NOT want to be) while learning about his intellectual and scientific values from Nell (that is: he learns how to research, what to research, and how to think about what he's discovered IN his research). By the end of the novel he has become the fuller, moral, wise, respected human being he was not at its beginning.

Elinor (Nell) Stone

American Nell Stone is the second of the book's three main characters – the apex, perhaps, of its romantic triangle, given that both Bankson and Fen love, admire, and desire her. She is portrayed as being physically small and slight, as somewhat chronically delicate (having contracted malaria on one of her research expeditions), and as fiercely, passionately intelligent, almost to the point of obsession. She is also a believer in what was known at the time (the late 1930's) as "free love: even though she



and Fen are married, she is of the belief that people should be able to love whom they choose and when they choose. An example of how this attitude manifests is in what the narrative portrays as a past lesbian affair with fellow anthropologist Helen Benjamin.

An important aspect of Nell's character is her search to engage in a mother / child relationship. This manifests in two ways. The first is in Nell and Fen's continued efforts to conceive a baby of their own, although it's interesting to note that the novel is ambiguous on the question of who wants a baby more – who is driving the efforts to conceive. The second way in which Nell's search for a maternal relationship shows up is in her relationships with the children of the Tam tribe, which are portrayed as affectionate, mutually satisfying and nurturing, and as clearly placed in traditional role modeling (i.e. mother as authority and teacher). This aspect of Nell's character is one of the primary manifestations of the novel's thematic interest in female sexuality and childbearing.

Fen (Schuyler Fenwick)

Aside from being this character's nickname, the word "fen" refers to a low-lying, marsh-like area of land: the sense here is of something untamed and unshaped – natural and a bit messy, perhaps even a little smelly. These descriptions can also apply to Fen the character who, while being intelligent and worldly, is also unpredictable, wild, dangerous, impulsive, and yes, at times, also a little smelly. What sets him apart from Nell and Bankson is his ambition: while the latter two are interested in research for its own sake, or for the sake of knowledge, Fen searches for both artifacts and information so that he can achieve fame, or profit, or both. Of all three of the main characters, each of whom is obsessed one way or another with one THING or another, Fen's obsession is driven, dangerous, and borders on the violent. There is also a streak of anger and vengeance about both it and him: he is the only character who is referred to as carrying a gun; he is emotionally violent several times throughout the narrative; and he often refers to his ambition for himself in the same breath as his ambition to be more successful than Nell. He is both powerfully intriguing and frightening, both to the other characters in the book and to the reader.

John and Martin Bankson

These are the brothers of protagonist Andrew Bankson. Both died at a relatively young age (John in World War I, Martin by his own hand), and both deaths had a profound impact on Andrew Bankson's life and perspectives. He admired them both, but was perhaps closer to Martin, whose glasses (one of the few mementoes of either brother he retains) he gives to Nell. Andrew Bankson's long, lingering grief over the loss of both his brothers is defined as a key element of the despair that drives him to the suicide attempt that begins the novel.



Bankson's Father

Bankson's father is portrayed as close-minded, domineering, and powerfully opinionated, a scientist whose unshakable belief that all three of his sons follow in his footsteps was, in Andrew Bankson's opinion, a key factor in the suicide of Martin (who wanted to be an artist); in the career choice of John (who died a soldier, but who lived to be a scientist); in his own insecurity; and in the emotional unavailability of his mother, who is alternately controlling and pitiful.

Helen Benjamin

Spoken about and referred to but never seen, Helen Benjamin is another well-known anthropologist and a former lesbian lover of Nell's. Helen is portrayed as being as domineering, as controlling, and as jealous of Fen: there is the sense here that Nell has a pattern of getting involved with such people, their genders notwithstanding. Helen's untitled manuscript is the trigger for an intense emotional and intellectual interaction between the three main characters.

Xambun

When Nell and Fen first begin their anthropological investigations into the Tam tribe, they hear stories of a legendary man named Xambun, who is held in such high regard that Nell thinks he is a legendary / mythic god or warrior. The community has set itself up to wait for his return from a long absence, which eventually happens. When he arrives, however, he is different from when he left, and seemingly desperate to prove himself a man: he accompanies Fen on his risky journey to retrieve the Mumbanyo Flute, and ends up dead. Bankson's contention is that Xambun was kidnapped and forced to work in western run mines; that he came back more white than indigenous; and that for that reason, wanted to die.

Malun

Malun is Xambun's mother, and a close friend of Nell's in the Tam settlement. It is on Malun's initiative that Nell is as welcomed into the tribe as she is. When Xambun dies, Malun's grief and anger is so intense that she rejects Nell, much to the latter's dismay.

Claire Iynes

Claire Iynes is yet another anthropologist, but one who left the work to marry into money. Bankson, Nell, and Fen encounter her at the end of the narrative, when they escape New Guinea and arrive in Australia. It is Claire who hosts the dinner party at which Fen gratefully accepts the acclaim of the guests for his retrieval of the Mumbanyo

Flute; and it is Claire who confirms, for an anguished Bankson, that Nell has indeed died.

Bani

Bani is the house servant employed by Fen and Nell in the Tam settlement. He is an orphan, his parents having died in a battle between his tribe and the Tam. He was raised in the Tam community, but was never welcomed. This perhaps explains why he adapts to Fen's ways of dress, and to western ways of living, sooner and more eagerly than anyone else in the village.



Symbols and Symbolism

Anthropology

Anthropology is the study of human society and culture. A relatively new science, one branch tends to focus on the examination, consideration, and interpretation of the lives, ways, and practices of tribal, indigenous cultures such as those portrayed in “Euphoria”.

The Indigenous Tribes of New Guinea

The novel’s three central characters – Bankson, Nell, and Fen – are involved in the study of several indigenous cultures settled along the Sepik River in New Guinea. As the novel begins, Fen and Nell have just left their work with the violent Mumbanyo tribe, which has a historical relationship with the Kiona tribe, which has been studied by Bankson. Other tribes referred to in the narrative include the peace-loving Duro and the Tam.

The Tam

This is the indigenous tribe given the most narrative attention by the book: or, more specifically, the tribe researched by Fen and Nell. The Tam settlement / community is the setting for much of the narrative’s action, while the roles / positions of the genders within the Tam simultaneously act as a focus for Nell and Fen’s studies while providing a metaphoric parallel and/or contrast to the gender-defined struggles between the two researchers.

The Mystic Flute

During his time with the Mumbanyo tribe, Fen was shown a sacred flute-shaped totem, or idol. His obsession with acquiring the six-foot tall object simmers in the background of the novel’s action until the climax, when Fen’s desperation to acquire the flute leads him to a dangers, life-destroying expedition.

Martin’s Glasses

Bankson has only a few mementoes of his deceased older brother Martin. Among them are Martin’s glasses, which for some reason Bankson has brought with him to New Guinea and which he gives to Nell to replace her own, accidentally broken by Fen. The gift of the glasses arguably marks the beginning of their relationship – or, more specifically, of their emotional and intellectual intimacy.



Babies

Throughout the narrative, Nell and Fen are both determined to have a child and surrounded by references to pregnancy, childbirth, and babies. While the narrative never explicitly defines why being a parent is so important to them, there is the sense that the parental relationship and the treatment of babies is thematically significant.

Nell's Book (The Children of Kirakira)

Throughout the narrative, the existence and success of Nell's book – a best seller and well regarded academically – is an irritant to Fen, who is professionally and personally jealous.

Helen's Manuscript

The rough draft of a book written by Nell's friend and colleague (and former lover) Helen Benjamin is the trigger for a fierce, deep, and lengthy consideration between Nell, Fen, and Bankson of anthropological theory and practice. Their discussions lead to the development of The Grid.

The Grid

The Grid is a distillation of the thoughts, insights, and theories developed by Nell, Fen, and Bankson as the result of their reading and considering the work of Helen Benjamin. Bankson describes it as becoming extremely popular both with the public, with academics, and eventually with the Nazis, who use its theories as part of their justification for genocide. The value of The Grid is eventually disavowed, or denied, by Bankson in response to what the Nazis did with the theory.

Nell's Blue Dress

This is a light-colored, summery dress worn by Nell on two key occasions – when she first meets Bankson and on the day they consummate their relationship. As a result, it becomes extremely important to Bankson, evocative of their feelings for each other. The dress is given to a member of the Tam tribe after Nell leaves, a token of her affection and gratitude. The novel's conclusion reveals that a fragment of the dress has made its way into a ceremonial Tam mask.

The Minyana

Late in the narrative, Nell is allowed to experience a women-only ritual from which she had earlier been barred. The minyana is both sensual and sexual, and seems to have developed in order to create and strengthen bonds between the women of the Tam

community. As such, the ritual is a manifestation of the novel's thematic interest in male-female gender roles and relationships.



Settings

New Guinea

New Guinea is an island in the South Pacific Ocean, just off the northern coast of Australia. Remote and isolated, the indigenous tribes living there were, for several years, the subject of frequent investigations by anthropological investigations researching human culture untouched, for the most part, by “civilizing” influences of, among other things, western economics, religion, politics, and philosophy.

The Sepik River

This actually existing long river runs through New Guinea, and was the real-world home for the tribes studied by the above-mentioned anthropological investigations. In the novel, the primary tribes investigated (the Mumbanyo, the Kiona, and the Tam) are all constructed around the river.

The Tam Tribal Settlement

Unlike New Guinea and the Sepik River, the Tam settlement is a fictionalized setting, based on actual historical research but ultimately an invented, shaped community. It is where the book’s central characters – Bankson, Nell, and Fen – conduct much of their research; develop their relationships; and discover truths about themselves and, arguably, about humanity as a whole.

Sydney, Australia

The novel’s final chapters are set here. After their hasty departure from New Guinea Bankson, Nell, and Fen re-encounter “civilization”, re-accustom themselves to it, and discover its apparent hollowness and shallowness. Sydney is also the setting for Nell’s final farewell to Bankson, and his discovery of her death.

The Late 1930’s

The book’s setting in time is significant because the late 1930’s were a time of transition: specifically, the buildup of tension towards World War II. With that in mind, there is a sense of impending, inevitable doom that lingers throughout the socio-cultural context of the book that in some ways reinforces a similar sense of doom in the central romantic triangle.



Themes and Motifs

Inner Darkness, Inner Light

The central narrative movement at the core of the narrative – more specifically, the journey of transformation undertaken by Bankson, its central character – is a movement from despair, through joy, to a kind of moral transcendence ... in other words, a movement from inner darkness towards inner light. He begins the novel in the aftermath of a failed suicide attempt, trying to resume what he continues to believe is an existence that's futile both personally and professionally. Over the course of the narrative, he finds illumination – hope, possibility, opportunity, inspiration – in his relationships with Nell and Fen (particularly Nell), while at the same time finding a kind of love and joy that he never had. That joy is truncated (cut short) by Nell's death, but that doesn't stop his inner forward movement: the last chapter of the narrative clearly and vividly portrays him as being morally inspired, guided by a clear, shining sense of what's just and what isn't.

This journey is taken in reverse by Nell, who begins her journey of transformation in a place of inspiration, hope, and possibility, but ends up full of doubt and regret – ultimately, she ends up dead. The narrative does suggest that in what seems to be her final moments, she has an episode of clarity and decides to return to the person (Bankson) and/or the place (New Guinea) that renewed her sense of inner light and purpose: but it's too late. The forces of selfishness and dark destruction around her and within her, representations of her inner doubts and fears and that have challenged and hurt her throughout the story, are simultaneously both triggered by and manifesting in Fen. Whether he is a direct cause of her death or not (the narrative is ambiguous), she dies more in association with him than in association with Bankson and the light and inspiration that he represents.

For his part, Fen seems to come across as almost entirely driven by dark inner feelings and ambitions: he is controlling, angry, often vicious, selfish, and in many ways quite desperate, a clear and vivid contrast to the external, more light driven characters of Bankson and Nell.

Colonialist Attitudes and Actions

The exploration, examination, and explanation of other cultures portrayed throughout the narrative, particularly in terms of European (read: white) attitudes towards non-Caucasian races and communities, was both common and accepted for centuries. White people meant civilization: non-white people were heathens, pagans, or worse. A common term to describe the attitudes at the basis of this kind of work was “colonialism” – the belief that European / white culture had the right, and even the responsibility, to colonize (that is: move in, take over, and dominate) non-white, and arguably non-Christian, cultures. While the Christian aspect of / perspective on this sort of colonial



perspective is almost entirely missing from “euphoria”, and while the primary Caucasian characters portrayed here (Bankson, Nell, Fen) are not overtly racist, the patronizing sense that “white knows best” is still pervasive, even though Bankson and Nell are portrayed as at least attempting to be culturally respectful and sensitive, there to learn rather than dominate. But even they have a sense of domination and superiority, particularly Nell: as Bankson himself comments she and Fen treat the members of the Tam like a commodity to be exploited and in many ways controlled.

In fact Fen is by far the most vivid example of this kind of colonial attitude. For all that he is portrayed as wanting to live like the people he’s studying, beneath that desire is the hard-core, unshakeable attitude that they are to be used. In other words, his attempts at integration are, in fact, attempts to win trust so he can use and manipulate it for his own ends. Nowhere is this attitude, which can be seen as an individual manifesting the attitude of an entire colonizing culture, more clear than in Fen’s determination to steal the Mumabnyo’s Flute to realize his own goals of success.

Gender Roles and Relations

This theme, an exploration of how traditions of male-female interaction play out and manifest in culture, appears in this narrative in two main ways. The first is more contextual, in that the cultural environments in which the central trio of anthropologists work, and the work itself, are in many ways defined by what might be called non-traditional gender interactions. Specifically: in many of the communities studied here (there are exceptions) women are equal, but different. They are afforded respect, compassion, and space in terms of the things they are uniquely capable of accomplishing (i.e. childbirth) and in terms of what they need in order to realize those accomplishments. What is perhaps even more important about the cultures portrayed (particularly the Tam and the Kiona) is that ceremonial gender switching is a norm: both communities are portrayed as integrating dances and rituals in which men are dressed as women and women dressed as men, even to the point of wearing penises shaped out of gourds. In short, gender roles are portrayed in these cultures as fluid and changeable, worthy of simultaneous respect.

The second way in which gender roles and relationships are thematically explored here is in a circumstance that is, in many ways, exactly the opposite of the larger tribal context and the manifestations of relationships within that context: the interactions of Fen, Nell, and Bankson are all almost entirely defined by what might be called traditional, or European gender roles. In spite of Nell’s clear intelligence and capability, she is viewed as something to be dominated over by Fen, and something to be placed on a pedestal and adored by Bankson, both traditional (stereotypical?) male perspectives on women, whether they’re attracted to them or not. There is, in many ways, a profound narrative and thematic tension between these two different avenues of gender relationship exploration, a tension that lends weight, power, and narrative intrigue to the novel.



Female Sexuality and Childbearing

A primary example of how gender roles and relations play out in the narrative is in its repeated use of childbirth, babies, and female sexuality. The opening image, recounted in narration, is of a baby being thrown into a river as part of a ritual associated with purification and sacrifice; throughout the narrative, Nell and Fen continually attempt to create a baby together; one of the aspects of Tam culture about which Nell is the most curious is a bonding ritual set aside for the community's women that turns out to be primarily sexual in nature. Perhaps one of the most intriguing and/or surprising manifestations of this theme appears in the form of the entrance to the men's enclave in the Tam colony, which is carved to resemble the external sexual organs of women. One possible interpretation of this: men enter the enclave in the same way as they "enter" a woman; they leave the enclave in the same way they leave the birth canal. In this women, and their capacity to give life, are seen as being a fundamental aspect of being male – or perhaps simply being human.

Here again, in the triangular relationship of the three central (white) characters – Bankson, Nell, and Fen – sexuality and childbirth are seen as something quite different. There is the strong sense that for Fen, male sexuality and the ability to impregnate a woman (specifically Nell) are in fact manifestations of power – specifically, the power and rights he feels are owed him simply because of his gender. At the same time, for Bankson female sexuality is at first something similar: witness his brief, passing, sex-only affair with a woman named Bett about whom he, and the reader, know virtually nothing. But as he becomes closer to Nell, as he becomes more intellectually and emotionally stimulated, his sexual attraction to her simultaneously builds to the point where he can no longer contain his desire. She is still an object: a beloved and desired one, but still an object. For Nell, being maternal is a powerful goal and action. This does not necessarily mean that she wants to have a baby for herself: there is a very strong sense in the narrative that her attempts at getting pregnant are, in fact, attempts to make Fen happy. But the fact that she is portrayed several times as nurturing the children of the Tam community, and being joyful while doing so, suggests that for her, being contentedly and fulfilled-ly female does not necessarily involve being impregnated by a man.

Obsession

Several characters in "Euphoria" might be described as obsessed, or obsessive. This is true in both the bigger picture of individual identity, and of the characters' actions and attitudes within individual incidents. In terms of the former, it could be argued that all three of the principal characters have at least some degree of obsession in their personal makeup. Fen is the most obvious example of this: he is clearly obsessed, almost from his first appearance in the narrative to the last, with getting his hands on either the Mumbanyo flute / totem or on its Kiona ancestor. This obsession leads him to dangerous, violent action that in many ways defines the book's climax. There are also glimpses of obsession when the narrative reveals how he feels about Nell's success: he



seems determined, almost beyond reason (which could be a definition of obsession) to be at least as successful as she is, if not more so. In the cases of Nell and Bankson, their obsessions are less overt, but are nonetheless both present and driving. For Nell, the obsession is to know and understand the cultures she's studying: for Bankson, he is obsessed with multiple things ... his lack of self-worth, his grief over the loss of his brothers, and eventually, with Nell. In both these cases, obsession leads at first to moments of ecstasy ("euphoria"), but ultimately to darker, more damaging feelings and experiences.

In terms of obsession as related to individual incidents and/or situations, the most vivid example comes in Chapter 22 (Part 7). There, reading and consideration of Helen Benjamin's book leads the three central characters into a deeply obsessive development of their response to that work. Time gets lost; inhibitions about expressing ideas disappear; and all three characters become more of themselves, with Nell and Bankson moving in the direction of what's good in them and Fen moving in the direction of the darker, the destructive, and the violent. In his case, the obsession, as with all his obsessions, is destructive: with Nell and Bankson, the obsession is again double sided, at first triggering inspiration which then becomes an almost addictive hunger for more information, more insight, and more connection between each other.

Styles

Point of View

The book's shifting point of view is one of its most notable stylistic elements. Much of the narrative – about four-fifths – is narrated from the first person, past tense point of view of protagonist Andrew Bankson. It's his interpretation of events and characters that, for the most part, defines what the reader comes to understand and/or believe about the characters, the book's situations, and its themes. That point of view is, arguably, defined by both tensions between, and insights emerging from, the difference in ages from the time he is writing ABOUT (i.e. when he was in his late twenties) and the time he is writing FROM – the narrative is never explicit on this point, but events in the last chapter suggest that there are several years (at least a decade, maybe longer – maybe MUCH longer) between the events of the story and the hindsight-rich perspective from which it's told. Bankson's point of view is also defined by several other personal circumstances, all of which color what Bankson makes note of, how he makes note of it, and how he interprets it.

The remaining fifth of the story is narrated from two other points of view. The more significant of these is that of Nell, writing in her journal, a narrative perspective that takes the reader a little further into the heart of a very complicated character without giving away everything about her. The second point of view in this final fifth portion of the book is that of an omniscient, third person narrator still focused on Nell – or, more accurately, Nell's relationships with the men in her life. These two secondary narrative perspectives give insight into the object of Bankson's obsession without giving her too much individual identity, which has an interesting thematic resonance: how often, in fact, does an obsessor see the person with whom s/he is obsessed AS a human being?

The final point to note in terms of point of view has to do with the fact that nowhere in the book is there any narrative from Fen's point of view.

Language and Meaning

There are several elements to consider in terms of how language is used in the book. The first is that there are shifts in word usage, sentence structure, and emotional sensibility that correspond with shifts in narrative perspective. Bankson's narration tends to be more distant, more observation-based, more matter of fact, with emotional elements slipping in almost as afterthoughts, but with a sharp, sudden, emotional power that clues the reader in to just how deep and how startling his feelings for Nell were. Nell's narration, by contrast and because it's presented in journal form, is less grammatically formal, more emotionally intense, and hints more than it explains. The third point of view, that of an anonymous third person narrator focusing on Nell's experience and perspective, is a combination of the two: objective and specific, but emotionally / experientially based.



Another key element of language usage has to do with its use of scientific terminology – or, more specifically, its use of words, phrases, and ideas that are defined by the scientific and/or intellectual background of the three central characters. There are times / places where the anthropology-based conversations between Fen, Nell, and Bankson come very close to being oblique and inaccessible simply because they are so full of jargon and profession-specific vocabulary. It's interesting to note, however, that for the most part, the author avoids stepping across the line from accessible to incomprehensible simply by having Bankson, in narration, sum up and/or skim over the more intense, the more esoteric, the more technical conversations.

The final element of language usage in the book is how it's portrayed as a way into the work done by Nell and the other anthropologists. Language, for them, is a way into culture and knowledge and insight: but yet, there is the sense, in Nell, at least, that language can also be a barrier.

Structure

There are two primary points to note about the piece's structure. The first is that the main body of the narrative – that is, the story of what happened between Bankson, Nell, and Fen – is essentially an extended flashback, framed within the perspective defined in “Point of View” above. This is the hindsight-defined perspective of the older Andrew Bankson who, at a few key points in the book, interjects commentary that reminds the reader that he is recounting events that took place several years ago. While there is little or no narrative line or plot in this “present day” framework, it does provide a structural context for the piece as a whole, leading the reader to questions about the present that the journey into the past will eventually answer (which is, arguably, the basic premise of anthropology, the science within which the story and characters are based).

This leads to the second noteworthy point about the book's structure: its essentially linear nature, its movement from cause-to-consequence, Event A leading to Event B and so on. There is a clear sense of cause and effect at work throughout the story. This is particularly noteworthy because Bankson's reason for telling the story is, at least in part, defined by his / its sense of inevitability, that events proceeded from cause to consequence towards a fated destination. This sense is arguably the result of the narrator writing from a perspective that allows for, perhaps even assumes, relationships between events: it might also be the result of a faint undertone of destiny-defined spirituality throughout the narrative. In any case, the bottom line is that within the above mentioned framework the novel follows a traditional, time-proven pattern of intensifying conflict over a period of narrative time building to a point of climax – in other words, very basic story structure.

Quotes

... [Nell] could see the expression on his face just from the way he was standing with his back arched and his heels slightly lifted. He would be compensating for his wrinkled clothing and his odd profession with a hard masculine glare. He would allow himself a small smile only if he himself had made the joke.

-- Narration (Chapter 1 paragraph Page 5)

Importance: This quote from early in the narrative comments on just how thoroughly Nell knows her husband, and on another level, illustrates the masculine power perspective that defines both his character and the narrative's thematic interest in gender roles and relations.

[Nell] tried not to think about the villages they were passing ... all the people she was missing, the tribes she would never know and words she would never hear, the worry that they might right now be passing the one people she was meant to study, a people whose genius she would unlock, and who would unlock hers a people who had a way of life that made sense to her.

-- Narration (Chapter 1 paragraph Page 8)

Importance: This quote illuminates the passion and commitment Nell brings to her work, and also relates to her later explanation of how she found her way into the field of anthropology.

I remembered Schuyler Fenwick as a chippy, tightly wound suck-arse who didn't like me much. But when I put out my hand he pushed it aside and wrapped his arms around me. I hugged him in return ... my throat burned with the unexpected emotion of it ...

-- Narration (Bankson) (Chapter 3 paragraph Page 18)

Importance: This brief sketch of the youthful relationship and tensions between Fen and Bankson portrays Fen as a potential hypocrite (a portrayal that deepens as the narrative progresses) and, simultaneously, evokes Bankson's intense, often referred-to need for human contact.

I was raised on Science as other people are raised on God, or gods, or the crocodile.

-- Narration (Bankson) (Chapter 4 paragraph Page 26)

Importance: This quote does for Bankson what an earlier quote did for Nell: define, for the reader, the intensity and importance of their anthropological work.

At night you cried, because everyone around you was crying, halls and halls of boys crying in the dark for their brothers. 'Tears are not endless and we have no more.' That is the line I like best of all those war poets. Even still, it took me a long time to feel much of anything again.

-- Narration (Bankson) (Chapter 4 paragraph Page 31)



Importance: In this quote, Bankson comments on his experience of grief following the death of his brother John, referring to the emotional state of being that existed at the time he met Nell and which his relationship with her, the narrative suggests, changed completely.

It's that moment about two months in, when you think you've finally got a handle on the place. Suddenly it feels within your grasp. It's a delusion – you've only been there eight weeks – and it's followed by the complete despair of ever understanding anything. But at that moment the place feels entirely yours. It's the briefest, purest euphoria.
-- Nell (Chapter 5 paragraph Page 50)

Importance: This is the key quote of the narrative, in that it defines even more deeply and vividly the value Nell places on her work, and the value that Bankson eventually adapts as his own. It's also important because it supplies the book's title.

It was the first time I had felt alone with them, and it hit me hard and low in the gut. They were here but they belonged to each other and they would go off again and leave me behind.
-- Narration (Bankson) (Chapter 6 paragraph Page 66)

Importance: In this quote, the ambivalence / awkwardness of Bankson's position becomes clear: specifically, the tension between what he longs for (i.e. human contact, and from these two people in particular) and what he's actually getting (i.e. contact that is turning out to be both limited and frustrating.)

You don't realize how language actually interferes with communication until you don't have it, how it gets in the way like an over-dominant sense. You have to pay much more attention to everything else when you can't understand the words. Once comprehension comes, so much else falls away. You then rely on their words, and words aren't always the most reliable thing.
-- Nell (Journal) (Chapter 7 paragraph Page 79)

Importance: This quote does two things: it underlines the apparent importance of Nell's practice of close observation; and, perhaps ironically for a novel that employs language so richly, suggests that language is not always to be trusted.

Nell and Fen had chased away my thoughts of suicide. But what had they left me with? Fierce desires, a great tide of feeling of which I could make little sense, an ache that seemed to have no name but want. I want. Intransitive. No object. It was the opposite of wanting to die. But it was scarcely more bearable.
-- Narration (Bankson) (Chapter 8 paragraph Page 86)

Importance: Again in this quote, the narrative defines the tension between Bankson's intense need for human contact and the ironic shortcomings of what he's actually receiving.



I think above all else it is freedom I search for in my work, in these far-flung places, to find a group of people who give each other the room to BE in whatever way they NEED to be. And maybe I will never find it all in one culture but maybe I can find parts of it in several cultures, maybe I can piece it together like a mosaic and unveil it to the world. But the world is deaf.

-- Nell (Journal) (Chapter 9 paragraph Page 95)

Importance: On one level, this quote again portrays how important her work is to her, coming across as it does as more of a mission or a calling than a job. On another level, in these thoughts Nell unconsciously reveals the streak of ownership towards the tribes she studies that taints, at least to some degree, what she wants to believe is the pure idealism of her goals.

Katie, the room murmured. It was like breathing life into something long inert. No one had ever said her name in their house afterward.

-- Narration (Chapter 10 paragraph Page 103)

Importance: This quiet, subtle quote evokes the atmosphere of grief-stricken silence in Nell's home in the aftermath of the death of her (Nell's) younger sister.

Fen didn't want to study the natives; he wanted to BE a native. His attraction to anthropology was not to puzzle out the story of humanity ... it was to live without shoes and eat from his hands and fart in public ... his interest lay in experiencing, in doing. Thinking was derivative. Dull.

-- Narration (Chapter 10 paragraph Page 106)

Importance: In this quote, the true nature of Fen's anthropological interests is revealed: he is not, as Nell and Bankson are, interested in learning and coming to insight ... he wants to live differently, to understand through inhabiting a new life rather than observing and thinking about it.

Nothing in the primitive world shocks me, Bankson. Or I should say, what shocks me in the primitive world is any sense of order and ethics. All the rest – the cannibalism, infanticide, raids, mutilation – it's all comprehensible, nearly reasonable, to me. I've always been able to see the savageness beneath the veneer of society. It's not so very far beneath the surface, no matter where you go.

-- Fen (Chapter 13 paragraph Page 137)

Importance: When put together with the quote describing Fen's opinion of anthropology in general (Quote 12), this quote not only states what might be considered a truth about anthropology as a science (i.e. that it's objective is to discover and understand both the animal and the civilization in each human being): Fen also reveals the truth about himself (i.e. that he too is inclined towards being uncivilized, an aspect of his character and identity glanced at several times in the narrative).

On the one hand I was disgusted by Nell and Fen's employment of the natives, the way they came in like a corporation and hired up the locals, skewing the balance of power



and wealth and thus their own results. But on the other, I saw how efficient it was, how much time it freed up ...

-- Narration (Bankson) (Chapter 15 paragraph Page 147)

Importance: With this quote, Bankson reveals his ambivalent inner conflict over how Fen and Nell approach their work. It also has thematic resonances, in that it suggests the colonialist attitude beneath the surface of their apparently scientific interests.

Alone was not something you saw among tribes [Nell had] studied. From an early age children were warned against it. Alone was how your soul got stolen by spirits, or your body kidnapped by enemies. Alone was when your thinking turned to evil. The culture often had proverbs against it. 'Not even a monkey walks alone' was the Tam's most repeated one.

-- Narration (Chapter 18 paragraph Page 158)

Importance: On one level, this quote refers to a particularly intriguing self-interpretation of Nell's research. On another level, it suggests that being alone is something that Nell thinks deeply about, worries deeply about - and fears, which perhaps is why she is still with the violently abusive Fen, and falls so intensely for the more nurturing Bankson.

I felt like her words were pulling it out of me and at the same time my axis was pulling the words out of her. I wasn't sure if I was having my own thoughts or hers. And yet I felt the melting ice, the sense of urgency. I bisected the line. Just as I had drawn it in my dream.

-- Narration (Bankson) (Chapter 22 paragraph Page 185)

Importance: This quote reveals the strength of Bankson's emotional and intellectual connection with Nell, a fundamentally important aspect of their developing, deepening, soon-to-become sexual relationship.

They WANT to tell their stories, she had said once, they just don't always know how. I'd had years of school, and years in the field, but my real education, this method of persistence I would draw on for the rest of my career, happened right then with Nell.

-- Narration (Bankson) (Chapter 24 paragraph Page 205)

Importance: This quote describes how Bankson's perceptions of research, and of himself as a researcher, changed as a result of working with Nell.

I could not take my eyes off her. It was as if she were performing some trick, some sort of unfolding. There was something raw and exposed about her, as if many things had already happened between us, as if time had leapt ahead and we were already lovers.

-- Narration (Bankson) (Chapter 25 paragraph Page 215)

Importance: Here Bankson's excitement at watching Nell work foreshadows their eventual sexual union.



I had never seen more clearly how streets like these were made for and by amoral cowards, men who made money in rubber or sugar or copper or steel in remote places then returned here where no one questioned their practices, their treatment of others, their greed. Like them, the three of us would face no recriminations. No one would ever ask us here how we had got a man killed.

-- Narration (Bankson) (Chapter 26 paragraph Page 230)

Importance: In the aftermath of Bankson's, Nell's, and Fen's sudden departure from their research site, they find themselves back in "civilization" where, in his narration, Bankson comments on how it is both a fearful and a safe place to be.

'I had to get that flute ... there has to be a balance. A man can't be without power – it doesn't work like that. What was I going to do, write little books behind hers like a fucking echo? I needed something big. And this is big. Books on this thing will write themselves.

-- Fen (Chapter 26 paragraph Page 238)

Importance: In this quote, Fen reveals his dominant masculine sense of identity, his colonialist attitudes, and the reasons why he was obsessed with retrieving the flute. Three of the book's major themes are developed here.

They were both there with me as I wrote, both of them advising me, and, finally, approving. I wrote with more conviction than I'd ever had in my life about anything. I wanted to get it right for her, wanted to hold on to those moments on Lake Tam in any way I could. I thought the writing would last the rest of the journey, but I was done by Genoa and posted it from there. I had signed all three of our names to it.

-- Narration (Bankson) (Chapter 30 paragraph Page 252)

Importance: This quote defines the final stages of Bankson's writing about The Grid; how he felt influenced by the ideas and attitudes of Fen and Nell; and how, working from a place of integrity, insisted that their names be included on its publication in recognition of that influence.