

The Easter Parade Study Guide

The Easter Parade by Richard Yates (novelist)

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Contents

The Easter Parade Study Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Plot Summary.....	3
Part 1: Chapters 1-2.....	5
Part 1: Chapters 3-4.....	7
Part 2: Chapter 1.....	9
Part 2: Chapter 2.....	10
Part 2: Chapters 3-4.....	12
Part 3: Chapter 1.....	14
Part 3: Chapter 2.....	15
Part 3: Chapter 3.....	16
Characters.....	17
Objects/Places.....	20
Themes.....	22
Style.....	24
Quotes.....	26
Topics for Discussion.....	28



Plot Summary

The Easter Parade is a novel by critically acclaimed author Richard Yates. This novel follows the lives of two very different sisters after the divorce of their parents in the 1930s. Sarah is a beautiful young girl who always felt secure in who she was and the love of her parents. After graduating high school, Sarah marries a handsome man who was raised in England. This marriage seems perfect on the outside, but hides a dark secret no one will learn until it is too late. Emily is Sarah's younger, less attractive sister. Emily grows up feeling as though she is constantly overlooked, as though she is an afterthought to her self-absorbed parents. Emily focuses on education and a career after high school, finding herself moving from one relationship to the next without thought of the future. The Easter Parade is a story of the impact of divorce on two very different girls, a novel that not only entertains, but leaves the reader with an overwhelming sense of the futility of life.

Emily and Sarah are two sisters who are forced to rely on one another when their parents divorce and their mother takes them from town to town as she searches for a way to make a life for herself in a world that is rarely kind to divorced women. Sarah, the older and more beautiful of the two sisters, often finds herself showered with attention from her distracted mother to the point where Emily feels left out and misunderstood. Once, when Sarah wants to go to a football game with a boy at school, Emily talks her out of it and finds herself the subject of scorn when their mother learns the truth. Emily also finds herself left out when Sarah gets braces on her teeth and is allowed to spend a day each week in the city with their father.

When Sarah graduates from high school, she is not interested in college but instead gets a job. Sarah falls in love and becomes engaged, but her absentee father suddenly becomes quite concerned with her future and asks some tough questions of her fiancée. When the fiancée cannot live up to expectations, he is chased away, leaving Sarah alone. A short time later, a new family moves into the apartment building where Sarah lives with her mother and sister. Pookie, her mother, pushes Sarah to meet the family's English raised son, Tony. Sarah begins dating Tony and they soon marry, taking up residence in the guest house of the estate owned by Tony's parents.

Emily grows up almost unnoticed by those around her. One night, Emily goes out to see a movie, but instead finds herself seduced by a young soldier on his way to war. A few months later Emily goes off to college where she has multiple love affairs. Most notably of these affairs is a young graduate student named Andrew who has a sexual dysfunction. Andrew ends his relationship with Emily for a year after telling her he plans to marry her, but must undergo psychotherapy first. The couple separate and Emily has more lovers, but when Andrew returns she readily submits to his marriage proposal. However, after an awkward visit to see Sarah and her growing family, Andrew becomes verbally abusive. Emily quickly divorces her new husband.

Emily finishes college and goes to work for a food magazine, where her editor is a renowned poet. Emily and the poet begin an affair that takes them to the wilds of Idaho,



where the poet takes a job teaching at a university. The relationship becomes rocky as the poet displays attacks of insecurity. Even a trip through Europe is blighted by the poet's memories of his first wife. Emily ends the relationship and returns to New York, where she takes a job as an advertising copy writer. In time Emily meet another man, Howard Dunninger, who would be the perfect man if not for the fact he is still in love with his soon-to-be ex-wife.

Emily becomes reacquainted with her sister through the turmoil of their mother's sudden illness. When Sarah comes to New York for a rare visit, Emily learns that Tony has been physically abusive to her their entire marriage. Sarah turns to Emily for help, but Emily turns her down. Not long afterward, Sarah dies from a fall in her home, an accident Emily comes to believe was the result of her husband's cruelty. Pookie dies not long after Sarah, followed by Howard's reunion with his wife after a six year separation, leaving Emily completely on her own. On top of this, Emily loses her job as well. On a visit to see her nephew, Emily falls apart, blaming everyone for the death of her sister. In the end, her nephew still welcomes her home, leaving Emily humbled by the only family she has left.



Part 1: Chapters 1-2

Part 1: Chapters 1-2 Summary

Richard Yates is the author of multiple novels and short story collections, including *Revolutionary Road*. This novel is about sisters whose lives were irrevocably altered by the divorce of their parents.

In chapter one, Emily finds herself forced to explain divorce to the neighborhood children while living in Tenafly, New York. A short time before this, Emily and her sister visited the newspaper where their father worked writing headlines as a copy-desk man. At home, Emily and Sarah had to contend with a mother who was always trying to live above her means. Once Pookie, their mother, left them with a neighbor and Sarah was injured when she tried to run under an iron bar. Sarah would have a scar over and across one eye for the rest of her life.

In chapter two, Sarah taught Emily about sex by describing the process to her. That Christmas, Emily can hear her parents talking downstairs and she calls to her mother in hopes of learning what is happening. Emily remains hopeful that their parents will get back together, but is saddened when this does not materialize over the next few weeks. A short time later, Sarah begins going into the city once a week in order to have her father provide her with braces for her overbite.

When Sarah is in high school, she always walks Emily home from school. However, one day Sarah tells Emily she must walk home alone. Emily is frightened to be home alone, so she insists that Sarah walk her home. When they arrive home, Sarah tells Pookie what Emily did and this causes Pookie to admonish Emily for being childish.

After high school, Sarah gets a job working on the Wendell L. Wilkie campaign. There Sarah meets a young boy and soon becomes engaged. However, Sarah's father questions the young man's ability to provide for Sarah and the engagement soon ends. A short time later, Sarah meets Tony Wilson, the English educated son of the upstairs neighbors. Sarah and Tony begin dating. While working for United China Relief, Sarah finds herself required to attend the Easter Parade in traditional attire. Tony attends with her in English formal wear and their picture appears in the paper.

Part 1: Chapters 1-2 Analysis

In these early chapters, the reader is introduced to the two heroines of the novel. Sarah is a beautiful young woman who seems to be loved without effort, the type of girl for whom everything just seems to happen. Her sister Emily, by contrast, is less beautiful and she seems almost forgotten in the spotlight that shines on her sister. Emily feels unloved, as though no one ever notices her, almost invisible. These girls are the children of divorce in the 1930s, a situation that was highly uncommon in that time



period. In fact, the chapter begins with the girls forced to explain what divorce is to a couple of playmates.

Although the novel is told mostly through the eyes of Emily, these first couple of chapters appear to be told by an uninvolved person, an authorial voice rather than a character as narrator. This gives the reader a quick overview of the childhood of the girls, but does not offer a great deal of detail into their thoughts and emotions. Many years pass quite quickly with only highlights shown to the reader. Sarah is married quite young, but like most of her childhood it appears to be a perfect match with a perfect future in store. This sets up not only a rivalry of sorts between the two sisters, but suggests a bar that Emily might feel she must surpass in order to win the love she feels she has not gotten in her sister's shadow thus far in her life.



Part 1: Chapters 3-4

Part 1: Chapters 3-4 Summary

In chapter three, Sarah and Tony marry in the fall of 1941. Pookie dresses in shocking pink and gets drunk, hitting on the groom's father. Emily now lives alone with her mother, but has received a scholarship to attend Barnard College. Emily's father takes her out to lunch to celebrate. However, their father does not eat, but spends the meal drinking heavily. A short time later, Emily decides to go to a movie alone and runs into a soldier looking for a jazz bar called Nick's. Emily agrees to show him. However, instead of going to the club, they go to Central Park where Emily loses her virginity in a small clearing. Emily cannot even remember the soldier's last name. A week later, Emily learns her father died of pneumonia. Emily also learns that her father had a lover named Irene Hammond. Emily goes to the funeral, but is worried because she cannot cry.

In chapter four, Sarah becomes pregnant with her first child, prompting a visit by Pookie and Emily to her cottage in the country. The cottage is part of an estate Tony's father inherited from his father. The visit with Sarah is quiet, but pleasant. Emily and Pookie then go up to the main house to visit with Tony's parents. Emily notes how much Tony's mother drinks. Pookie suggests to Tony's father that they name the estate and she suggests Great Hedges. It is a joke, but Pookie does not seem to understand that.

Emily begins attending college while Sarah has three sons, one right after the other. Emily dates many men in college. At a party Emily meets Andrew Crawford, a graduate student who is impressed with Emily's courage and intelligence. They begin dating a year later. Unfortunately, Andrew has a sexual dysfunction and cannot perform. This causes him a great deal of embarrassment, even though Emily is supportive. Finally Andrew tells Emily that he loves her and wants to marry her, but he needs to see a psychotherapist to work through his problems. Andrew promises to call Emily again in a year. During that year, Emily has several love affairs, the most memorable one with a merchant seaman who eventually decided he wanted to explore his homosexual side. After a year, Andrew reenters Emily's life. Despite a continuation of his sexual dysfunction, Emily and Andrew marry. Unfortunately, after a visit to Sarah and Tony, Andrew becomes verbally abusive, prompting Emily to seek a divorce after only a few months of marriage.

Part 1: Chapters 3-4 Analysis

In chapter three, it becomes clearer to the reader that Emily is the narrating character. There is still some distance in the narration based mainly on the fact that so much time passes in just a few words. However, the reader becomes aware of Emily's envy of Sarah and her apparently happy marriage as well as her feeling of being left behind. Emily loses her virginity almost casually, beginning a lifetime of sexual promiscuity that will define Emily's life. At the same time, the reader becomes aware that both Emily's



parents are drunks, miserable people who never really found any happiness in their lives. In fact, Pookie flirts with the father of her own son-in-law, clearly hoping to take some of the good fortune her daughter as found. At the same time, Emily learns that not only did her father die, but that he had a lover she knew nothing about. This makes Emily wonder what all she really knew about her father and causes her difficulty in grieving for her loss.

Emily goes to visit her sister several times during her college years. These visit all appear to be calm, happy visits in which Emily becomes more and more aware of the differences between herself and her sister. In fact, Emily begins to feel as though she surpasses her sister in intelligence and she begins to feel uncomfortable in her sister's presence. This sets a tone for their relationship that will continue as the plot develops. Also of note in these chapters is Emily's relationship with Andrew. The reader has the impression that Emily did not really want to marry Andrew, but married him because she felt as though she owed it to him or to protect his feelings. However, the moment Andrew abuses her emotionally, Emily is out the door. This will be important later in the novel as other events show a strong contrast between Emily's actions and those of another character.



Part 2: Chapter 1

Part 2: Chapter 1 Summary

Emily has graduated college and become a writer for a food magazine. Emily feels that the food magazine is just a door into the world of magazine writing. At home, Emily works on articles for more prestigious magazines, including one on abortion that relates her own experiences with abortion, that she never completes. Emily's family push her to marry again, shocked at her apparent desire to be a single, working woman. When Jack Flanders comes to work at the magazine as Emily's editor, she is instantly drawn to him. They begin dating and Emily learns that Jack is a published poet who is only working at the magazine in order to escape the world of academics. Emily reads one of Jack's books, but she finds it difficult because she is not a fan of poetry. However, she manages to say all the right things to Jack about it.

Jack is invited to Iowa to teach for two years in the Writers' Workshop at the State University of Iowa. Jack tells Emily this is a huge honor and asks her if she will go with him. Emily agrees. Before leaving, Jack and Emily make a visit to Sarah. The boys have grown into young teens. Peter is a talented musician and he has decided he wants to be an Episcopalian priest. Sarah reveals that she has a talent for writing and that she is trying to write a book about one of her husband's ancestors who made a pilgrimage into Montana. Emily is quite impressed with Sarah's efforts.

Part 2: Chapter 1 Analysis

Emily has become a working woman in an era when this was quite uncommon. Emily does not seem to notice that she is living her life in a revolutionary style, she simply sees it as what she wants. At the same time, Sarah continues to raise her little family in her cramped little cottage. Emily appears to look down on Sarah even as she confesses to admire her writing abilities. The reader is quite surprised to see how well Sarah can write and finds themselves rooting her on. Even Tony, her big, silent husband, seems supportive. However, the reader gets the feeling that Tony's opinions of the writing could change in an instant, putting an end to Sarah's aspirations. This suggests a sense of control that Tony has over Sarah despite her strong will of childhood.

Emily meets a poet and becomes his lover. There is no talk of marriage, but Emily gives up her life in New York to move to Iowa with him, suggesting she is not quite the independent woman her family believes her to be. This relationship seems solid, despite Emily's inability to understand his poetry, and suggests a long term commitment. However, given Emily's track record, the reader wonders just how long this relationship will last.



Part 2: Chapter 2

Part 2: Chapter 2 Summary

Jack and Emily find a pleasant house in Iowa City where Jack can work peacefully when he is not teaching. Emily begins writing an article about her experiences in Iowa, but has trouble completing it. Jack begins to drink and struggle with insecurity over his poetry. In fact, insecurity makes Jack moody and he refuses to allow Emily to read what he has written. Emily gets a letter from Sarah that tells her Pookie has lost her job. Tony's father allows Pookie to move into an apartment over their garage. Emily also learns that Tony's parents plan to move into the city, leaving the larger house for Tony and Sarah to move their family into. Finally, Sarah tells Emily that she has had to give up the book she was working on because she needs to do research in Montana and she feels that is out of the realm of possibility.

Jack becomes obsessed with a perceived rivalry between himself and another poet working at the State University of Iowa. Emily wakes at night and often finds Jack drinking alone. Emily begins taking Jack on long walks in the afternoon and for a time it seems to bring back the old, confident Jack that Emily first met. One day they make love under a tree. Then, that winter, Jack decides to take Emily to Europe. Emily is excited by the trip, but it turns sour when Jack begins making constant comparisons between this trip and a time when he lived in Europe with his ex-wife. Emily ends up spending much of her time alone. When they return to Iowa City, Emily begins thinking about leaving Jack. Emily postpones the announcement for a short time when Jack has an attack of self-doubt, but finally returns to New York alone.

Part 2: Chapter 2 Analysis

Emily goes to Iowa City with the hopes of enriching her relationship with Jack and perhaps coming out of it a married woman. However, Emily is quickly bored and frustrated with the amount of emotional support Jack needs. The strong, confident man Emily met in New York becomes an insecure, angry writer with whom Emily cannot relate. Ironically, as Emily once again attempts to write a magazine article and fails to do so, the reader begins to see a similarity between the two writers. Neither has a strong enough confidence in their own talent and neither can complete what they started out to do. This applies to Sarah as well. Sarah quit work on her book when she decided she needed to do research in Montana. The reader, however, suspects there might be more to this story than Sarah reveals. However, Emily glosses over the news as though is not of any importance, underscoring the attitude Emily has toward her older sister.

Pookie has finally managed to place herself in a position in which Tony's father is obligated to care for her. It is not the romantic situation that Pookie might have hoped for, but at least she can finally stop worrying about caring for herself and focus on the

life of leisure she has always sought. This suggests trouble to the reader, but that remains to be seen.



Part 2: Chapters 3-4

Part 2: Chapters 3-4 Summary

In chapter three, Emily wakes in a strange apartment with a man she does not remember. Emily sneaks out of the apartment and goes to her own apartment, trying to remember where she was the night before. Emily works for an advertising agency as a copy writer and she went to a party thrown by some of her business associates, but this is all she can recall. Before Emily can do anything more about her situation, Sarah calls and tells her that Pookie has collapsed. Emily goes to Sarah's home and finds her mother in a coma on her apartment floor. Emily and Sarah carefully dress and place their mother in bed while they wait for the ambulance to come for her. At the hospital, Sarah and Emily are told their mother has had a cerebral hemorrhage, most likely brought on by alcoholism, and will probably not recover. That night, Emily stays at Sarah's house and they spend most of the night reminiscing about their childhood. Emily returns home the following night and receives a call from her mysterious lover that prompts her to recall the entire evening.

In chapter four, Emily and Sarah put Pookie into a nursing home for which they agree to split the costs, despite Sarah's confession of money struggles. Emily is promoted in her job and has several lovers, including Michael Hogan, a public relations executive who seemed to want little from Emily beyond what she was willing to give. During this relationship, Emily learns that Jack published his book of poetry, poems based mostly on their relationship. The book was panned by the critics. A year or so later, Sarah comes to New York and meets Emily for lunch. Emily finds her sister to have become a slovenly drunk. That night, Emily is summoned to Sarah's hotel where she discovers that Tony beat her severely. Not only this, but Emily learns Tony has been beating Sarah since the beginning of their marriage. Emily wants to help Sarah, but does not know how and ends up making empty threats to Tony. Sarah makes a momentary attempt to leave her husband, but ultimately decides to return to him.

Part 2: Chapters 3-4 Analysis

Emily continues to have multiple lovers as she builds a mediocre career in advertising, a career she never really wanted and has little enthusiasm for. Pookie becomes ill, making herself more of a burden on her two daughters. This is a result of acute alcoholism, a disease that seems to hold captive multiple members of the family. This appears to speak of deep unhappiness, but the reader is unclear if the alcohol came first or the unhappiness. At any rate, it seems Emily is the only one to have escaped this disease, but the reader can make the argument that she has replaced alcohol with sex.

Sarah is an abused woman. When Emily learns that Tony beats her sister, she is shocked. Somehow Emily has missed the signs all along the way. The reader might have noticed some of the signs, but it is still a shock when the truth is revealed. Emily



claims to want to help her sister, but she does little. Emily threatens Tony with threats that she knows are useless. Later, when Sarah wants to leave Tony, Emily encourages her, but also seems reluctant to have her sister become more of a permanent fixture in her life. This causes Sarah to lose whatever hope she might have had and decide to return to her husband. The reader can only wonder what the consequences of this decision will be.



Part 3: Chapter 1

Part 3: Chapter 1 Summary

Emily begins using Sarah's circumstances as a conversation piece with her multiple lovers. Emily appears to look down on her sister, though she believes her need to talk about it stems from her guilt. In 1965, still working as a copy writer for an ad agency, Emily meets Howard Dunninger. Emily finds Howard attractive from the beginning, but backs away when she learns he is married. However, Howard tells her that he and his wife are separated. Emily and Howard begin a love affair that quickly turns into a committed relationship. Unfortunately, Howard makes it clear that he is still in love with his wife and Emily often fears that he is seeing his wife on his frequent business trips to California.

One night in February, Sarah calls and asks Emily to allow her to move in with her. Emily refuses because Howard has moved into her apartment. Sarah quickly changes her mind and recommits to her marriage. A short time later, Emily learns that Sarah is in the hospital. Howard calls the hospital and learns that she is there for acute alcoholism. However, when Emily goes to visit Sarah, she discovers that she has a fairly severe head injury. After her release from the hospital, Sarah keeps in touch with Emily through letters that are filled with mundane news, never again revealing any of her hardships to Emily. At the end of a summer vacation in 1967, Emily and Howard visit Sarah and her family. Emily is struck by how much like her mother-in-law Sarah has become. Sarah is clearly drunk and out of touch with reality. However, Sarah's boys have grown into strong men. Tony Junior has entered the military, Peter is in college and preparing for the seminary, and the youngest, Eric, has become a mechanic.

Part 3: Chapter 1 Analysis

Emily uses her sister's misfortunes to have something to talk to her lovers about. Emily claims it is guilt that brings it out, but the reader thinks it might have more to do with Emily's desire to be special, to be better than her sister. Finally, Emily finds a man she can commit to. Ironically, this man is still in love with his wife, leaving Emily insecure and wondering when he will finally leave her.

Sarah asks Emily for help once more and Emily flat out refuses. This causes Sarah to hide her fear, the abuse, and pretend it is not happening. To do this, Sarah begins drinking heavily. This parallels the behavior of their mother. Instead of hiding abuse, however, Pookie drank to hide her broken heart that resulted in her impetuous decision to leave a man she loved deeply. Sarah is not a strong person and she has few choices in her time. Staying with Tony was the only option open to her after her sister refused to help her. Sarah let her sister down. The reader wonders how Emily will deal with the consequences of this.



Part 3: Chapter 2

Part 3: Chapter 2 Summary

Emily and Howard go to Sarah's funeral. Emily has been told Sarah died of a liver ailment and a fall, but Emily suspects Tony killed her sister. This is reinforced when Tony receives a call from the police department during the reception after the funeral. It is also reinforced by Tony's almost jovial behavior. Many times Emily has wanted to ask one of her sister's sons what really happened, but she does not.

Emily returns to her life. Things at work have changed. Once Emily's boss was supportive and friendly, but she has recently become angry and critical. On top of this, Emily learns that her mother has died. Emily attends the funeral with all three of her sister's children. Afterward, Peter takes Emily to see Tony. Tony has remarried a big, strong woman and is suffering the after effects of a bad car accident. Again Emily thinks of asking if he killed her sister, but she finds Tony confused and childlike.

Howard makes a trip to California and returns happily. However, another trip a short time later goes differently. Howard does not call and fails to allow Emily to pick him up at the airport. Emily learns that Howard was not in California on business but he went to see his wife. Howard's wife has matured and decided that she wants to get back together with him. Without a moment of regret, Howard packs his things and leaves. A short time later, Emily loses her job after forgetting a new ad copy in a taxi.

Part 3: Chapter 2 Analysis

Sarah has died and Emily is convinced that Tony killed her. However, Emily does nothing about her suspicious, going so far as not asking anyone about the accident that killed her sister. Emily keeps silent, perpetuating the abuse that more than likely killed her sister. Emily's mother dies shortly after Sarah, leaving Emily alone without any family. Then Emily loses her lover and her job. Emily is completely alone with nothing to support her, no one to talk to, and nothing to do. It is a difficult time in Emily's life. Emily is now an older woman, in her late forties, and she looks back on her life to find nothing but a bunch of broken relationships.



Part 3: Chapter 3

Part 3: Chapter 3 Summary

Emily spends ten months without a job. Emily tries to write an article about her struggles, but she never finishes it. A friend of Emily's encourages her to get out and invites her to a party. However there are no single men there, causing Emily to lose interest. A neighbor of the party host runs a masturbation studio for women and Emily visits it, but she finds herself unable to show her interest because of the dark opinions of the other party-goers.

Emily calls her nephew Peter, who has now married and has a child of his own. Emily arranges a visit to Peter's home. Peter picks Emily up at the bus station. At first Emily feels awed by her nephew and she feels as though she is too poor, too unsophisticated to be with her nephew. On the drive back to Peter's house, Emily demands to know how her sister died. Emily begins yelling at Peter, taking out the frustrations and the anger that have lain dormant inside her for years. When they get to Peter's home, Emily threatens to leave, but Peter patiently coaxes her into the house.

Part 3: Chapter 3 Analysis

Emily finds herself completely alone. At a party, Emily finds herself fascinated by a masturbation studio, but she cannot defy the adverse opinion of the woman by admitting her fascination. This suggests to the reader that Emily was never really the feminist that her family always thought she was. Emily was simply living her life the way she wanted, not to defy convention but to find love.

Emily visits Peter and suddenly she is the insecure blob that she saw her sister to be on their frequent visits. Emily has come full circle and returned to the forgotten child, the less attractive one, the unloved one. Emily fights this feeling by demanding to know if Tony killed her sister. Peter finds the question outrageous, as any loyal son would do. However, instead of turning Emily away, Peter welcomes her into his home. This seems to support the idea the writer has tried to promote all along, that family is family no matter what. It is an idea Emily lost somewhere along the way, but lucky for her Sarah's son remembers.



Characters

Emily Grimes

Emily Grimes is just a child when the novel begins. Emily adores her older sister, and learns everything that is important to a child from her, but feels as though she is ignored because of the attention paid to her older, more beautiful sister. As Emily grows, she feels that she has surpassed her sister and outgrown her. Emily looks down on her sister, no longer able to relate to her. At the same time, Emily finds herself drawn back to her sister over and over again, as though she needs to see her sister's life in order to feel gratified in her own.

Emily is the child of divorce in a time when people simply did not get divorced. Not only this, but Emily's mother is a restless soul who is always coming up with new schemes to make herself rich. These schemes cause the family to be forced to move constantly, sometimes more than once in a year. Emily has no sense of stability, no sense of self worth. In time, Emily begins looking for her own happiness in other people, moving from man to man until she suddenly finds herself alone. Emily's entire life is changed by her mother's spontaneous decision to get a divorce and her father's determination not to allow his heart to be broken a second time.

Sarah Grimes Wilson

Sarah is Emily's older sister. When they are young, Sarah is the apple of her father's eye and this translates into a complicated relationship with her mother. Sarah's beauty and her apparent intelligence turns her into someone her sister desperately admires. Therefore, when Sarah marries, Emily assumes that Sarah has made the life for herself that all women should aspire to. However, Emily has never felt she is anything like Sarah; therefore, she does all she can not to follow in Sarah's footsteps.

Sarah always did everything that was expected of her. When Sarah becomes engaged at nineteen, she allows her parents to run the boy off because he does not fit their ideal of a husband for their eldest child. However, the end of this affair sends Sarah into a marriage that will turn into more than twenty years of shame and abuse. When Sarah finally turns to her sister and asks for help, she does not find any. Sarah becomes resolute in her situation, drowning her sorrows in alcohol until a drunken fall or push finally ends her life.

Esther 'Pookie' Grimes

Esther 'Pookie' Grimes is Emily and Sarah's mother. Pookie divorces her husband on a whim, determined to become rich and famous on her own if her husband cannot take her there. However, Pookie eventually comes to realize that life on her own is not all she



thought it would be. Pookie asks her husband to come back, but he refuses out of fear of another broken heart. This leads to depression for Pookie.

Pookie lives vicariously through her children. When Sarah is a child, Pookie loves to watch her date and imagine what the dates were like. When Sarah is old enough to marry, Pookie finds herself picking out eligible men for her daughter, especially after her ex-husband disapproves of the first boy Sarah chooses to marry. At the wedding, Pookie openly comes on to the father of the groom under the mistaken opinion that he is rich. In the end, Pookie comes to live in the big house in the country, but not until her life is so consumed by alcoholism that there is little else for her to look forward to.

Walter Grimes

Walter Grimes is Emily and Sarah's father. Walter Grimes had a desire to become a writer one day, but finds himself stuck on the copy desk for a long career that ends in dismissal. Walter becomes an alcoholic to both bury his disappointment in his career and to soothe his broken heart over the end of his marriage. Walter is a good father when he is around, but he remains aloof and uninvolved until his death, leaving Emily unaware of some of the most important aspects of his life, such as his committed lover.

Andrew Crawford

Andrew Crawford is Emily's ex-husband. Andrew is a graduate student when he meets Emily. Shortly after their meeting, Andrew confesses to loving Emily and wanting to marry her, a fact that shocks Emily because they have only known one another a week. However, Andrew has a sexual dysfunction that he feels can be cleared up with psychotherapy. Andrew takes a year to work with a therapist and then comes back into Emily's life, marrying her almost immediately. Unfortunately, the sexual dysfunction has not gone away and Andrew begins taking out his frustrations on Emily with verbal abuse. Emily divorces him after less than a year of marriage.

Jack Flanders

Jack Flanders is a divorced man with several children. Emily meets him when he takes a job as an editor on the same food magazine where she works. As they begin to date, Emily learns that Jack is a poet. In fact, Jack is invited to teach at the State University of Iowa. Emily goes with him and immediately finds herself forced to provide emotional support for Jack's quickly growing sense of inadequacy in relation to his writing. In the end it is this overwhelming need on Jack's part that causes Emily to walk away from him.



Howard Dunninger

Howard Dunninger is a lawyer that Emily meets while working as an advertising copy writer. Howard is an older man who married a much younger woman only to have that woman choose to walk out on him out of fear of missing out on life. This causes Howard a great deal of heartache and he never truly gets over his wife. In fact, after six years of living with Emily, Howard leaves her to reunite with his ex-wife.

Tony Wilson

Tony Wilson is Sarah's husband. When they first begin dating, everyone is mesmerized by Tony's good looks and his English reared charms. When Tony dresses in odd attire to support Sarah during an Easter Parade, everyone believes he is a good man. However, what everyone does not know is that Tony is an unhappy man who beats his wife. For more than twenty years Sarah submits to his beatings, afraid to turn to anyone for help. When she does, Tony does not seem to care, laboring under the belief that it is his right to do whatever he wants to his wife. In fact, when Sarah dies, Tony becomes drunk and jovial at her funeral and the reception afterward. In the end, Tony suffers in a terrible car accident and marries a woman much stronger and more opinionated than Sarah ever was.

Peter Wilson

Peter Wilson is Sarah and Tony's middle child. From a young age, Peter becomes determined to be an Episcopalian priest. This determination carries Peter through his complicated youth in a home where his father often beat his mother and into a peaceful adulthood. Peter is a good, strong man, someone who always steps in to take responsible for those around him. It is Peter who Emily turns to in her loneliness when she needs a connection to someone who once loved her.

Tony Wilson

Tony Jr. is Sarah and Tony's eldest child. Tony is a troubled child who once threatened to kill his father for beating his mother. As a high school dropout, Tony becomes involved with an elderly divorcee whom his parents believe is using him. After this affair ends, Tony enters the military and returns home with a wife who already has children of her own and is expecting Tony's child. Tony's life seems to reflect his parents' tumultuous past, but appears to end with a happiness that none of the adults in his life ever managed to achieve.



Objects/Places

Letters from Sarah

Through the course of the novel, Emily receives multiple letters from her sister Sarah, most of which belie the terror going on in Sarah's life.

Articles

Emily begins writing multiple articles throughout her life, but she never completes a single one.

Dog

Emily adopts a dog while living with Jack in Iowa City. Jack accuses her of using the dog to fill a hole not having a child has left.

Tree

Emily and Jack make love under a tree while walking one day. Jack later uses this afternoon for one of his poems in a new book of poetry that is published after Emily leaves him.

New York Sun

Walter Grimes is a copy writer for the New York Sun when his daughters are young.

Food Feild Observer

Emily works for a time for a food magazine called the Food Field Observer. This is where Emily meets Jack Flanders.

Poetry Books

Emily reads Jack's first volume of poetry in order to feel closer to him. Emily does not enjoy poetry, but feels she has grasped the important meaning of the poems.

Barnard College

Emily receives a full scholarship to attend Barnard College after high school.



Tenafly, New Jersey

Tenafly, New Jersey is one of the many places the Grimes girls live as children.

San Francisco, California

Howard Dunninger's wife lives in San Francisco and he often visits her when he goes to California on business.

St. Charles, Long Island

Sarah's in-laws have an estate in St. Charles, Long Island. Sarah and her family live in a cottage on the property for many years before finally moving into the main house after her in-law's retire to New York.

New York City

Emily lives and works in New York City most of her adult life.



Themes

Divorce

The novel begins with the thought that the divorce of their parents doomed Sarah and Emily Grimes to never have any happiness in their lives. In fact, the girls are deeply affected by the divorce of their parents. Their parents' divorce in the early thirties, a time when divorce was nearly unheard of. Their mother, Pookie, tries to make a living on her own, going into many schemes that include real estate. Pookie is trying to survive as a single, working mother in a time when there was not even a word for this situation, let alone an understanding of the enormity of such an undertaking.

Sarah grows up the impression that divorce ruins lives; therefore, she refuses to get a divorce even when her husband is beating her. There are a few times when her children are gone that Sarah considers an escape, but her sister refuses to help her so Sarah feels trapped. Emily, on the other hand, is quick to walk away from uncomfortable situations. Emily divorces her husband after less than a year of marriage and walks away from a lover because his emotional needs are too much to handle. When Emily finally finds love and happiness, it is with a man who is not emotionally available to her. It is as if Emily is simply looking for excuses to get her heart broken.

Children of divorced parents often blame their parents for the difficulties they experience in their lives. In this case, the children never outright blame their parents for the difficulties in their lives because perhaps they do not see that the divorce was a direct cause for their own behaviors. It is clear, however, that divorce affected not just the couple involved, but everyone in the family down through more than a single generation.

Futility of Life

The end of the book leaves the reader with the idea that life goes by so quickly that sometimes in the end someone might look back and wonder what it was all about. Emily's life is filled with disappointments and the hope that there is always time to find what she is looking for. When that time runs out, Emily continues to look even as she finds herself isolated and without anyone to care about her. When Emily turns to Peter Wilson, it is only to assuage her guilt and to find out if there is anyone in the world who still cares.

Sarah leaves the reader feeling almost the same futility. Sarah lives her life the way she was expected to do in such an era. Sarah marries and makes a home, allowing her husband to be the dominating figure in the household. However, no one ever knows that Sarah is the victim of domestic abuse until it is too late to do anything to help her. Sarah dies a broken woman, an alcoholic and broken spirit, the very type of person she herself looked down on as a younger woman.



Abuse

Abuse is a theme of the novel not only because Sarah is a victim of physical abuse, but because there are many different types of abuse a person can suffer in a lifetime. From the early days of her life, Emily suffers the inequality of being the younger sister to a more beautiful girl. Emily is lost, ignored, and left looking for love in places where she should not. Emily is abused by a soldier who wants to make love to a girl, any girl, before he goes off to war. Emily is then emotionally built up and later destroyed by her first husband.

When Emily learns that her sister is the victim of physical violence, she does nothing to help her. At first Emily seems to want to help, she wants to get Sarah away. However, Emily later uses it as a tool to get sympathy for herself and to build up her own ego by ridiculing what her sister is going through. When Sarah calls and asks for help again, Emily turns her away, leaving Sarah to be further abused and eventually to die a sad, lonely woman. In the end it is Emily who suffers the most because she is the one with no one.

Style

Point of View

The novel is told in the third person point of view. The story is seen through the eyes of Emily Grimes. However, the point of view has more characteristics of the authorial voice than the omniscient third person point of view most modern readers are accustomed to. The narration of this novel does not include any comments that the characters could not possibly be aware of as the narration progresses, but it also does not allow the reader to be inside Emily's head, to know her thoughts and feelings as she thinks and feels them.

The point of view of this novel is structured in such a way as to allow a great deal of time to pass in a short amount of space. The novel is written as though someone is looking back on a life and telling the highlights. The novel most closely follows Emily, the second child in a divorced family, but it does not allow the reader the intimate portrait of her actions that a modern reader might have come to expect in a novel of this type. However, the story is told with strong narration and tight writing, making the point of view appropriate to this particular plot.

Setting

The novel, which takes place over more than four decades beginning in the early thirties, does not have a permanent setting in the beginning of the novel, but many, many settings as the characters move from town to town. Eventually the narration settles into three prime settings. The first is New York City. It is in New York City that Pookie and her daughters settle shortly before Sarah graduates high school. Later, Emily returns to the city for the remainder of her adult life. Sarah, however, moves to Long Island where she lives with her family for the duration of her marriage. Emily, in the second part of the novel, also lives in Iowa City, Iowa for more than a year.

The setting of the novel is not as important to the overall plot as the transient nature of the main character. In childhood, Emily often moves with her mother and sister as her mother attempts to find a life filled with flair. When Emily is an adult, she appears to settle in New York, but even she moves around a little, living in Iowa City for a time with a lover. Sarah, however, makes a permanent home for herself on Long Island, living on the estate of her husband's family. This stability appears to support Sarah's long term marriage, but actually mocks it in a way when the reader learns that she is a victim of domestic abuse.

Language and Meaning

The language of the novel is simple English. The novel is filled with language that contains little slang despite the many eras it passes through. The writer does not



introduce any of the avuncular that a reader might associate with the fifties and sixties, even though a large portion of the novel's plot is set in these decades. The novel also does not include the overly formal language that might have been present in the thirties and forties. Instead, the author chooses to write in a straightforward, grammatically correct language that underlines the education level of the main character.

The language of the novel gives the impression of being somewhat formal even though it is really a simple English that is precise and grammatically correct. The author gives the impression of educated characters, of characters familiar with the written word. This is appropriate when dealing with the main character, Emily, who is a college educated writer. Surprisingly, the language also supports that of her sister who is also a writer, though she never attended college and never really liked school. The language of the novel is strong, is well designed, and it supports the characters and plot well.

Structure

The novel is divided into three parts. Each part has its own set of numbered chapters, each with four except for the last that has only three. The novel is told primarily in exposition, telling a story rather than creating carefully designed scenes. There are scenes in the novel, as well as dialogue, but the majority of the novel is told in exposition as though someone is looking back on a life and explaining the highlights of that life.

The novel has one main plot. The main plot follows the unhappy life of two sisters after the divorce of their parents. This plot follows the sisters through childhood into adulthood, ending as one sister is dead and the other is struggling with an overwhelming sense of isolation. There are several subplots, including one that follows the abuse suffered by one sister and the guilt the main character feels for not saving her. All the plots come together as the novel ends.



Quotes

"Neither of the Grimes sisters would have a happy life, and looking back it always seemed that the trouble began with their parents' divorce."

Part 1: Chapter 1, p. 3

"It was Sarah who gave Emily her first information about sex."

Part 1: Chapter 2, p. 11

"Pookie had spent a lot of money on her own dress and rich little hat, both in a new shade called Shocking Pink, and she'd spent many days regaling anyone who would listen with the same weak joke."

Part 1: Chapter 3, p. 29

"But she stopped crying abruptly when she realized that even that was a lie: these tears, as always before in her life, were wholly for herself—for poor, sensitive Emily Grimes whom nobody understood, and who understood nothing."

Part 1: Chapter 3, p. 42

"Did women ever divorce their husbands after less than a year of marriage?"

Part 1: Chapter 4, p. 76

"The book would take time, but she loved doing it—and it was a wonderful feeling just to be doing something again."

Part 2: Chapter 1, p. 94

"In November she made up her mind to leave him. She would go back to New York but not to Food Field Observer; she would find a better job, and a better apartment too; she would embark on a new and better life, and she would be free."

Part 2: Chapter 2, p. 117

"Pookie didn't die the next day, or the day after that."

Part 2: Chapter 3, p. 136

"Emily felt along the wall for the light switch, and when she found it the room exploded into clarity. There was blood on the tangled sheets and on the pillow; there was blood down the front of Sarah's slip and all over her swollen, wincing face, and in her hair."

Part 2: Chapter 4, p. 150

"Whenever Emily thought about her sister over the next few years—and it wasn't often—she reminded herself that she'd done her best."

Part 3: Chapter 1, p. 159

"The trouble was that he was still in love with his wife."

Part 3: Chapter 1, p. 165



"And you know a funny thing? I'm almost fifty years old and I've never understood anything in my whole life."

Part 3: Chapter 3, p. 229



Topics for Discussion

Who is Emily Grimes? Why does she move from lover to lover without ever finding a commitment? Why does Emily divorce her husband? Why does she leave Jack? What is the longest relationship Emily ever has? How does it end? For what reason? Is this Emily's fault? What does this say about Emily's choice of men? What does this say about her life?

Who is Sarah Grimes Wilson? Why does Sarah end her first engagement? Why does she become engaged to Tony Wilson? Does Sarah love Tony? Why does Sarah give up her writing? What could she have done with her writing? Why does Sarah never tell anyone about the abuse she suffers at the hands of her husband? What does Emily do to help her sister? Why?

Who is Pookie? Why does she encourage her children to call her Pookie? What is her real name? What does this nickname say about her personality? Why does Pookie want flair? Why does she divorce her husband? How does she react when he refuses to take her back? Why does Pookie suffer a cerebral hemorrhage? What causes it? How does the reaction of her children reflect their relationship?

Why does Walter Grimes not like his job? Why does he not quit? What does the reader suspect caused Grimes to become a heavy drinker? What caused his death? Why did he not go to the hospital to get help? What surprises Emily about his life that she learns after his death? Why can Emily not cry for her father? What does this say about their relationship?

Who is Tony Wilson? How does he treat his wife? What about the relationship between his father and mother suggests that Tony lived in a home filled with violence? What comparison is made between Sarah and Tony's mother? What does that suggest about each woman's life? Why did no one see the truth about these two women?

Discuss Peter Wilson. What is his profession? Why does this chosen profession surprise his mother so deeply? What does this profession say about Peter? Why does Emily turn to Peter when she believes she is going crazy, when she is lonely and without companionship? Does Peter give to Emily what she so desperately need?

Discuss the themes of the novel. What is theme? How many themes can you name in this novel? How are the themes presented to the reader? How does the author illustrate his themes? What impact do these themes have on the overall impact of the novel?