

A Feast of Snakes Study Guide

A Feast of Snakes by Harry Crews

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Plot Summary

"A Feast of Snakes" by Harry Crews is a story about Joe Lon Mackey, a young man who is watching his life slip past his fingers. As a high school football player, Joe Lon excelled at everything he touched. However, upon graduation, it was revealed that he could not read. His girlfriend, Berenice Sweet, goes off to college, and Joe Lon is left to run his father's liquor store. He gets married, has two children, and watches as his wife begins to age and become unattractive. He feels helpless and powerless. When Berenice comes back to town for the snake roundup, Joe Lon hopes to rekindle his old love. However, she brings with her a new love, and Joe Lon is forced to take a back seat. He, along with Willard, the local high school football hero, Candy, Berenice's younger sister, Duffy Deeter, a lawyer from Florida, and his girlfriend, Susan Gender, all meet together and begin a trek to outdo one another in terms of the violence they can cause. They attack an older man, Poncy, and humiliate him until he defecates himself. Meanwhile, Lottie May, a young black girl, is taken by the sheriff, Buddy Matlow, and raped. She goes to Joe Lon's sister, Beeder, to ask for help, and insane Beeder tells her to kill that which bothers her. Lottie May begins to see snakes everywhere, and attacks Matlow, thinking his penis is a snake. She castrates and kills him. As Joe Lon is forced to face the loss of his ex-girlfriend, his failing life, and a consistent string of events that lead him to face the failure of all social structures, Joe Lon begins to lose his mind. As the violence surrounding the snake hunt increases, so does the anger and loneliness inside Joe Lon. Joe Lon's father is an alcoholic who raises and abuses fighting dogs. One night, at a match, Joe Lon goes insane after hearing of the death of Matlow, being confronted by his wife about his affair with Berenice, and after hearing a local preacher begin to speak about snakes as signs of Satan. He is taken away, but soon recovers. Unable to face his life, Joe Lon begins to unravel even further. At the snake hunt the following day, Joe Lon shoots the preacher as he preaches, shoots Berenice, a representative of the law, and an innocent hunter. He is forced into the snake pit and is killed. As he dies, he sees his sister and Lottie May, watching him.

The story is a tale of the disastrous results within a person whose whole social structures have failed. For Joe Lon, the church, the family, his wife, his school, his coach, and his friends have all failed to teach him morality, dignity, or anything positive. In the end, Joe Lon chooses death over his life, but finally feels in control again.



Part One: Pages 1-52

Part One: Pages 1-52 Summary

The book opens with Candy Sweet discussing her love of snakes as she performs several routines as a majorette for the Mystic high school football team. She looks for her boyfriend, Willard Miller, among the football players as she flirts with Joe Lon Mackey, who is standing at the goal posts watching practice. She notes that he and her sister used to be an item, but that when it came time for Joe Lon to go to college, it was revealed that he couldn't read. Berenice, her sister, thus went to college without him. She also recalls that Joe Lon killed a traveling salesman by drowning him while much of the football team watched. Joe Lon watches Candy and thinks of Berenice as he drinks, because she reminds him of his own failed life. He rereads a note from Berenice, noting she will be in town for the snake roundup. After lamenting as he watches Willard play football, Joe Lon drives to his trailer. He thinks of the suffocating anger he will feel when he arrives in the trailer with his wife and babies. He places a diamondback he has caught into one of the many barrels of snakes on his property, and goes inside. He sees his wife and thinks she looks like the woman he married from the back. From the front, however, he notes her hanging breasts, her large stomach and her horrible teeth. He yells at her to get her teeth fixed, and she self consciously notes she hasn't had time as she stops smiling. She tries to pacify him, but when the children start crying, he violently turns on her in anger, screaming at her. She doesn't move, or even look at him. He storms out of the trailer as she begins to cry. He guiltily regrets his actions as he sits in his truck. He believes the upcoming annual snake hunt may drive him mad.

Joe Lon drives to his liquor store, howls outside in anguish, and then goes in. He talks with George, his black shopkeeper, about the sales for the day. Joe Lon drinks beer and allows George to take whiskey. George tells him the sheriff, Buddy Matlow, has taken his sister, Lottie May, to jail under the pretense of being a prostitute. Joe Lon knows Billy often does this with girls in order to have sex with them. Matlow knows he has power as a prior all-American football player and a decorated Vietnam veteran. Joe Lon promises to ask Billy about it. The two then talk of the portable toilets for the snake hunt. The snake hunt has grown over the last several years, and is now a huge celebration with thousands of people. His father calls and asks for Joe Lon to send George over with a bottle of whiskey. The two argue, and Joe Lon finally agrees to bring whiskey later and spends the next several hours carting whiskey to blacks outside who are not allowed to come into the store. Willard and Candy, known as Hard Candy, arrive and begin drinking with Joe Lon. The two boys begin challenging one another. Finally they bet on the amount of time a snake will take to strike and eat a rat. The sheriff, Buddy Matlow, arrives, demanding beer and moonshine and Willard and Billy begin verbally pushing one another's buttons. Candy knows it won't come to blows, but wishes it would as she and Willard leave. Joe Lon thinks of the two teens making love in the car, as he did with Berenice in high school. He knows Willard and Candy will raid her father's drug cabinet, and will go off in search of fun and trouble, as he and Berenice did. He remembers a night in his senior year when he realized Berenice would leave for college and he would



be left behind, his glory days already over. He remembers taking Berenice to see the snakes before a roundup, and recalls the feelings of sadness and anger as Berenice told him she loved him. She lays down in the pit where the snakes will be kept during the hunt, and begins to speak of them filling her coldly. They make love as Buddy Matlow arrives with a woman in his car.

Back in the store, Joe Lone shakes off his recollections, and asks Buddy to let Lottie May go. Buddy agrees and returns to the station. He sends his deputy home, and threatens Lottie May. He angrily chastises her for calling him Mister, since he has already admitted he loves her. She tells him he may as well let her go, as she doesn't plan to have sex with him. However, he brings out a diamondback and threatens to let it into her cell. She gives in at the threat and has sex with him. He lets her go and she walks home, remembering nothing but the snake in a kind of terror. Joe Lon sees her and offers her a ride, but she doesn't answer. Joe Lon drives to his father's and delivers his whiskey. Joe Lon loves his father and sister, but knows he could never live with them. Joe Lon knows his father would despise that he beats Elfie on occasion, and they have already had to lie to him when Elfie appears with black eyes and broken bones. His father has castrated men, scalped men, and has the best fighting dogs around because he treats them with a cruelty few others could bear to witness, but he doesn't agree with hitting women. He is nearly deaf, and sits watching his fighting pit bull on an electric treadmill when Joe Lon arrives. The dog, Tuffy, is bleeding from his front legs as he is exhausted and keeps falling, his breathing ragged. To his jaw is clamped a weight, used to strengthen his jaw muscles, but he can no longer lift it and so his mouth is stretched open, bleeding. In the next room, Joe Lon can hear the television of his sister. His father, Big Joe, laments that he gets mean because he has to listen to Beeder's television all day. He notes he is thinking of getting the state to take her, but Joe Lon reminds that he would hate for people to know he put his only daughter into an insane asylum. His father notes Joe Lon should go to church, as he himself is a deacon. Joe Lon leaves, but stops to see his sister. He thinks of her before she was crazy, and feels pity for her. He speaks to her, and the two talk, but incoherently. Joe Lon admits he keeps thinking if he could only shake her hard enough, she would suddenly become sane again. He looks around the room, which used to be his, at the trophies and wonders why he was blessed with the ability to play football but not to care about education. He admits he liked violence, but cared little for studies. He asks Beeder when she last left the room. He looks in the chamber pot she uses for her bathroom, and notices urine as well as feces. When he tells her she should do something about it, she smears feces in her hair. Joe Lon retreats from the house, downs a half bottle of whiskey in his truck, and waits for the memory to recede. He watches his father lead Tuffy gently back to the pens and notes the television is still on in Beeder's room as he leaves.

Part One: Pages 1-52 Analysis

In the opening section of the novel, the reader meets many of the main characters of the story. Hard Candy Sweet, the current head majorette of the Mystic Rattlers is an attractive young woman filled with sexuality and a darker nature that lures her to



violence, alcohol, and drugs. She is paired with Willard Miller, who is captain of the Rattlers and who has an equal love of violence and high excitement. Joe Lon is introduced, and one feels immediate pity for the young man. Having peaked during his high school football career, Joe Lon cannot read, which was ignored by the many social structures in his life that could have spared him a lifetime of boredom and whiskey running in a small town. The school, which should have noted such a glaring problem, cared too much about his football career to worry about his grades, and his coach was too interested in his beating state records. His father, an alcoholic, is clearly a violent man, showing Joe Lon learned his behaviors from his father. Joe Lon's own guilt when he beats his wife and his frequent bouts of pity for Beeder and for others, combined with his habit of howling in despair, shows he is an emotional wreck and is spiraling downward as he faces his life. The knowledge that Joe Lon killed a traveling salesman foreshadows the story later in the novel about his mother and the traveling salesman. The letter from Berenice in the beginning of the novel, combined with the frequent memories of Joe Lon, foreshadow a confrontation or meeting between these two characters. Elfie's response to beatings by her husband shows her to be an afraid woman who has little self esteem. Buddy Matlow's frequent arresting of women, including George's sister, Lottie May, show him to be abusive of his power as sheriff, and his use of a snake to terrorize Lottie May foreshadows her own insanity throughout the novel, and her castration of him later in the novel. Beeder's statements in this section about wishing for death and killing that which offends her foreshadow her use in the novel as a teacher to Lottie May in terms of ways to rid herself of that which torments her.

From the very beginning of the novel, the diamondback is used in connection with sexual references and violence. It becomes a symbol throughout the novel of degeneration, immorality, violence, abuse, and deviant sexuality. The snake is seen as a venomous creature that evokes anger, fear, and sexual tensions. Such symbolism is used throughout the rest of the novel, as well. Candy loves the look of the snake on her sweater by her breasts, and loves being a part of the band snake. Berenice and Joe Lon's sex life often involved the visualization of snakes. In the store, the two men and Candy become violently charged when they work with the snake. Joe Lon is violent following his day of snake hunting. Billy Matlow uses a snake to persuade Lottie May to have sex with him. Clearly, the snake symbolizes immorality and violence.

It is also clear in this section that alcohol plays a vital role in the lives of these small town individuals, and contributes to their overall behaviors. Throughout this section, Joe Lon is continuously attempting to get drunk to forget his life and his concerns. Joe's father, Big Joe, also uses alcohol as a way to cope with his life, his pain, and his daughter's illness. Candy and Willard use alcohol or top of drugs to push their senses even further as they journey together in a life of violence, sex, and substance abuse. Even the sheriff uses alcohol right before raping Lottie May. It is clear alcohol is used for a variety of things in the book, but all of them are negative.

Another notable feature of this section is the introduction of the segregation of the area in the novel. The characters in the book are clearly segregated between blacks and whites. Joe Lon carries his whiskey to "niggers" and has blacks working for him. The



blacks are looked on as workers, not as equals. The black women of the story are looked on as sexual prizes, not as equals. In addition, the writing style of the characters suggests their level of education, and much of the dialog between the blacks and whites suggests the blacks are undereducated, as is Joe Lon.



Part One: Pages 52-76

Part One: Pages 52-76 Summary

Joe Lon awakens the following morning to nearly a thousand people gathering for the snake hunt. Many bring their own pet snakes, and still more are vendors, attempting to sell their sketches, paintings, and crafts made from and focused on snakes. Sheriff Matlow buys two rubbers with snake patterns, and many look on as an older woman weaves snake rattles into mosaic artwork. Joe Lon remembers the drunken night before, when he got drunk enough to confuse reality with fantasy, and had fallen into bed savagely with who he thought was Berenice. Elfie, his wife, awoke to a savage drunk having sex with her. She tried to fend him off, but he proceeded to do to her all the things he used to do to Berenice, and called her by Berenice's name several times. He awakens to see a bruise on Elfie's face, and he rises so he doesn't have to face her. He goes to the school to watch Hard Candy and the other cheerleaders make the large paper mache snake, but becomes aroused, so he returns to his ten acre campground, filled with a thousand people. Lummy, George's brother, thanks him for getting Lottie May released, but notes he believes she is now hexed, as she is acting strangely. Only when Joe Lon promises to ask Matlow about the hex does Lummy agree to stay at the store all day. As Joe Lon wanders the grounds, he sees his old coach, who tells him of a tainted camper with over five hundred snakes in his trailer. The two speak of the dog, Tuffy, and his training. Joe Lon sees Berenice and causally strolls toward her, although he wants to run, either away from her or to her. She sees him and runs to him, reminding him both in her run and in her embrace of how things used to be. He senses she is more sure of herself, and is uncomfortable. They begin to talk, and Joe Lon suddenly notices a boy standing near Berenice, as though he is with her. He is feminine, with beautiful eyes, and Joe Lon immediately hates him. When Berenice tells him Shep, the boy, is on the debate team, Joe Lon hates him more, not knowing what debate teams are. They shake hands and talk of Joe Lon's wife and children. Embarrassed, he excises himself and angrily storms to his trailer where Elfie is awake and cooking breakfast. She is pleasant and tries to get him to eat and take aspirin for his headache, but Joe Lon just angrily tries to hold himself together as he grips the edge of the table. He thinks of hurting Shep as Elfie gives him coffee, waiting to see if it is to his liking. She tells him triumphantly she made the appointment with the dentist, and he forces himself to congratulate her, telling her she will be happier. She notes she only did it for him, and that she and the boys love him. He wants to howl.

Lottie May awakens after a night of nightmares about snakes to her mother telling her she will have to go help the Mackey's with Beeder, as she is ill. She looks at her mother and sees snakes in her hair. Her mother notes there is blood on her dress and quietly tells her to change, but Lottie May meticulously cleans the dress and wears it. Her mother changes her mind, asking her to stay home and telling her she can have ice cream, her lips trembling. Lottie May knows she cannot tell her mother about the snakes, and knows she will not see them. Her mother, knowing Beeder needs food and care, relents and sends Lottie May, but also sends her cousin, Brother Boy. As they walk



to the house, Lottie May sees everyone in town with their snakes, and Brother Boy begins talking about the "soda crackers" and their fascination with snakes. Lottie May quickly makes Big Joe's breakfast, and then Beeder's, taking it to her room. She eats with her hands, and Lottie May begins to talk to her about the snakes. Lottie May says she doesn't know what to do, and Beeder tells her to kill it, or hide. When Lottie May responds she can't shoot a gun, but does have a razor, Beeder tells her to carry it always, just in case she can kill it. When Lottie May leaves, Beeder turns up her television to drown out all sounds, and thinks to herself that she has found somewhere to hide that is just as good as her mother's.

Willard arrives at Joe Lon's trailer, where Elfie is happy because Joe Lon has told her, after four whiskey drinks, that her apron is pretty. She feeds the men breakfast, and takes the children to the grocery store while the men talk. Willard notes he saw Berenice, and Joe Lon asks if he met the "debate player". When Joe Lon admits he doesn't know what debate is, Willard tells him it is a game played with a rubber ring, where two men wear white slippers and try to catch the rubber rings in their mouth. Joe Lon explains that his father wants Willard and him to handle Tuffy in the dog fight, since Bog Joe's hearing is so ruined. The two men walk out and begin wandering around the grounds. They stop near a trailer where Victor, a preacher in a snake handling church, is staying. Willard begins to mess with the preacher, but Joe Lon convinces him to move on, noting that Victor believes what he preaches about snakes and God.

Part One: Pages 52-76 Analysis

In this section, readers see how Joe Lon's life is falling apart. Having beaten his wife and violently raped her, calling her by an old girlfriend's name, he is unable to face her. The campground around him is filling with people waiting for violence, and with their snakes. His escape leads him to Lummy, who speaks of a hex against Lottie May, foreshadowing her spiral into insanity after her encounter with Matlow. Joe Lon's encounter with his coach again shows that the structures in place to help him learn morality are warped, as his coach drinks heavily and accepts a gift of free alcohol from Joe Lon. He seems to care little for Joe or his father, but asks about the fighting dogs, presumably because he plans to place bets of the dog. Joe Lon's encounter with Berenice is not as he expected, and shows Berenice as a cold, unfeeling character who clearly enjoys using her sexuality and her energy to cause men pain. She intentionally brings her new boyfriend to meet her old boyfriend and seems to enjoy his discomfort. Joe Lon is able to contain his humiliation, however, and even to compliment his wife on his return to the trailer, but the inner workings of his mind in this section show he is teetering on the brink of a breakdown. His encounter with Willard when discussing the sport of debate show him to be uneducated, and also indicate that Willard enjoys making a fool of him as he openly lies to him about the sport. However, when Willard attempts to harass the snake preacher, Joe Lon seems to respect the man's belief enough to intervene, again showing him as a caring individual, albeit one with severe instability of character and mental state.



Matlow's purchase of rubbers with snake patterns symbolizes again not only the link between snakes and sex, but also his abuse of power to obtain sex. Lottie May, on the other hand, has clearly temporarily lost her mind as she begins to see snakes everywhere. It is clear both from Lummy's statement that she is hexed and from her mother's reactions to her daughter, that Lottie May has been severely traumatized. Lottie May's conversation with Beeder, while outwardly seeming disjointed, clearly shows an intent by Lottie May to use a razor to kill that which torments her, which in this case is Buddy Matlow. This foreshadows her castration of him later in the novel. Beeder's own thoughts at the end of this encounter show not only her insanity, but a link between her insanity and her mother, which is explained later in the novel.

This section also helps to show the character of Elfie. Having been beaten, raped, and verbally abused by her husband the night before, Elfie immediately calls the dentist the following morning, believing this will make Joe Lon happy. Rather than being angry with him for his actions, she instead attempts again to please him, believing his actions to be based on a fault of hers. Such actions are classic in cases of abused wives, and this is shown again in her happy reaction to his compliments following his morning whiskey. Elfie is clearly a woman who wants nothing more than her husband's love.

Finally, this section also introduces Victor, the snake handling pastor. While his character is unimportant, the association between snakes and evil is present throughout the novel, and seems to coincide with the preachings of the priest. It is clear Joe Lon appreciates the sincerity of the preacher, foreshadowing his reactions to the preacher later in the novel.



Part Two: Pages 79-121

Part Two: Pages 79-121 Summary

In this section, Duffy Deeter is having sex with Susan Gender and thinking of horrific events such as the Nazi death camps and murder as Susan lays under him in pain. Susan is his mistress and is a beautiful young grad student at the University of Florida, while he is a married lawyer. He goes outside the Winnebago to work out and meets Willard and Joe Lon. After some good natured male jabbing, the men begin to work out together, consistently trying to out do one another on bench pressing weights. When Joe Lon learns Susan is in college, he wonders why he is the only one amongst these people who isn't educated. Soon, the men begin drinking. A small man comes up and begins speaking to Deeter. Willard and Joe Lon begin to pester him, asking if he is a traveling salesman. The man, sensing the boys are dangerous, introduces himself as Poncy and the two continue to belittle him, pleasing Deeter and Susan. Candy arrives and asks what the boys are doing, which seems to take down their tensions, and they let the man go. He lies, telling them he is an architect. Candy and Susan begin to work on a cheer routine, and Poncy stands to the side to watch the men work out. Candy and Susan go to the trailer, which is filled with trophies of karate and handball and other single man sports. Susan admits Deeter is dangerous. Poncy bursts in, noting the boys demanded he bring them whiskey and beer. When he leaves, Candy admits Poncy is likely to be hurt by the boys if they get drunk.

Big Joe stops outside his daughter's door to ask if she is okay and hears her turn up the television. He is angry at her insanity and tries to bid off memories of her and his wife, but they come. He recalls his wife in her favorite rocker with a bag over her head. He goes outside to the dogs, and feeds the puppies first. Next, their older brothers are fed, who are more muscular with a deeper bark. Tuffy, the main fighting dog, is only watered, but he is silent. His father, in the far cage, is the breeding dog, and he is let out. Bug Joe speaks to him softly, reminding him he is too old to fight or breed. He muzzles him, and opens Tuffy's cage to muzzle him as well, but Tuffy immediately attacks his father. Big Joe manages to separate them and lead them, muzzled, to the fighting ring. Tuffy kills his father quickly, and Big Joe feeds and rests Tuffy, and chooses one of the older puppies to take into the house.

The boys come to a draw on the bench. The two boys face off, but Susan interrupts them before they fight, noting she wants to find a bar. Poncy tells them he has a Porsche they can drive, and immediately regrets it. They drag him to the Porsche, telling Candy to go with Susan and Deeter in the Winnebago. The two boys put Poncy in the back seat and proceed to abuse his Porsche as they drive. Willard vomits out the window, with the back window down so much of it lands on Poncy. Willard offers bourbon to Poncy, who throws up in his own lap. Joe Lon appears happy, but inside realizes he is miserable. He recalls the feeling beginning during the workout, when he glanced across the road and saw Victor, the preacher, reading the Bible. When he sees the old woman, Mother Well, with him, he notes that she sews rattles to fabric as



passionately as he follows his God. Joe Lon realizes he has nothing he is passionate about, and that his life is meaningless. He tells Willard he feels like the end of the world, and Willard tells him a beer will help. Joe Lon knows it will not.

They arrive at the bar, and Poncy, afraid his bowels will give, takes his time getting out of the car, while the two boys do not even glance at him. They go into the Blue Pines bar. The boys drink two pitchers waiting for the girls and Deeter. When Deeter and the girls arrive, he takes them to the pool tables and beats them soundly, while Susan pulls Poncy to the dance floor. Candy gooses him, and Susan continues to force him to dance. The two boys soon join, and begin punching him back and forth between them. Poncy, terrified and in great pain, tries to appease them while Deeter dances seductively with Candy. Poncy is dragged to the dance floor again, and the boys begin to spin him in violent circles as Susan and Candy join in. Poncy defecates himself. They decide to go to Joe Lon's for snake, and begin to leave, when Willard realizes Poncy is still standing on the dance floor in shock. He gently leads Poncy outside. They make fun of him, and leave him with his Porsche as they take the Winnebago. Joe Lon realizes he is out of control. He did not intend to hurt Poncy, but knows he has, and knows he is spiraling downward.

Back at the trailer, Joe Lon violently kills the snakes, but forces a smile for his wife. Joe Lon tells Candy to call Berenice and invite her and Shep for snake. Berenice arrives without Shep, and meets everyone as Deeter dreams of having sex with her. Berenice immediately links with Susan and Deeter as they discuss philosophy and law, while Candy, Joe Lon, and Willard sit drunkenly bored. Elfie comes from the kitchen, and she and Berenice hug tentatively. As she and Elfie go into the kitchen, and Joe Lon admits he is thinking of having sex with her. Willard surprisingly questions this, but Susan Gender helps to empty the trailer after eating, suggesting a twirl off. As everyone leaves the trailer, Joe Lon grabs Berenice and drags her to the bedroom. He begins to violently have sex with her as he watches his wife outside through the closed blinds. Berenice talks incessantly about loving Shep, baton twirling, and other topics. He can see his wife looking at the window around the blinds, and notes that love ruins everything. Joe Lon recalls his mother left his father and family for love, in that she left for a traveling salesman she loved, and that Joe Lon had to admit that his mother left them for love. His father had went and dragged her back. Beeder came home from school that day to find her mother wearing her father's tie, cinched around a plastic bag over her head. To her was pinned a note, reading "bring me back now, you son of a bitch". Beeder had never been the same since. Joe Lon asks her to orally satisfy him, then has anal sex with her, and then has her orally satisfy him again, noting that such actions are true love.

Part Two: Pages 79-121 Analysis

This section introduces several key parts to the story, along with several new characters. Duffy Deeter is an older version of Joe Lon and Willard, although with more education. He enjoys violence, deviant sex, alcohol, and rage, and serves to promote such actions in Willard and Joe Lon. Similarly, Susan proves to be not only equally



adoring of violence and rage, but also a proponent of deviant sexual relations. She uses her clear sexuality to encourage men to fight and enjoys the reactions. As the men work out, they are clearly trying to one-up one another and trying to prove their manliness. When Susan and Candy add their sexuality to the mix of testosterone, alcohol, and strength, there is no question that violence will result, even in the minds of the women. Susan and Candy both admit their men are dangerous, but still seem to promote their actions. When Poncy, a weaker male, arrives, there is no question that he will become a target for their pent up frustrations. In the case of Joe Lon, these frustrations stem not only from the current situation but also from his continued realization that his lack of education has led to his being left behind. In addition, the idea that Poncy may be a salesman seems to anger Joe Lon, which, when combined with the knowledge that he killed a salesman in his youth, foreshadows the story of his mother's infidelity with a salesman later in the novel. Candy's statement that Poncy will be hurt by the boys also foreshadows their treatment of Poncy in the novel.

Big Joe clearly cares for his daughter. Although he is unable to stand her insanity, it is clear from his reactions to her that he loves her and only wishes she were not mentally unstable. While it is unclear at this point in the novel the link between his wife and his daughter, his inability to fend off visions of his wife in relation to the insanity in his daughter foreshadow the story later in this section of his wife's death. The scene with Big Joe and his dogs again shows the duality of this character. While he is unspeakably cruel in his treatment of his animals, he clearly loves and cares for them simultaneously. Much like this son, who shows a similar duality, Big Joe is unable to properly love anything. However, his treatment of his dogs, all related, shows a depth of emotion that at least borders on concern. He recognizes that his breeding leads to the death of the father by the son, and although he doesn't seem to mind this end, he also shows no joy. To him, this is the proper end to a fighting dog's life. It is an honorable death, to Big Joe. His taking of an older puppy into the house shows the cycle is continuing. Tuffy will be retired, and a new fighting dog will take his place. Tuffy will be used to breed, and will eventually be killed by his son, in the same manner. This cycle of violence is used to symbolize a similar cycle between Big Joe and Joe Lon.

The trip to the bar, and the scene in the bar between Poncy, Willard, and Joe Lon shows clearly the effects of alcohol, rage, and pent up hostility. Poncy, just trying to fit in, finds himself the target for Willard and Joe Lon's frustrations. They throw up on him, physically and verbally abuse him, and force him into humiliation. Susan and Candy participate in this abuse, and the bartender and farmer in the bar do nothing to assist. Joe Lon's feelings on being lost, of knowing he is out of control, and his envy of Mother Well and Victor's passions show again he is a lost character with little to believe in. Such an envy of faith foreshadows the shooting of Victor later in the novel.

At the trailer, Joe Lon again proves to be completely disillusioned. His determination to have sex with Berenice surprises even those around him, but they do little to stop him, showing again a lack of a proper moral support system. His sexual relations with Berenice are violent, deviant, and almost angry. His recollections of his mother's suicide in this scene show not only his inability to properly feel love and affection, but also explain many of the events previously mentioned in the novel that relate to Beeder's

insanity, Big Joe's anger, and Joe Lon's inner anger. The fact that Elfie seems well aware of he and Berenice's actions foreshadow her reactions later in the novel.



Part Two: Pages 122-151

Part Two: Pages 122-151 Summary

In this section, Lottie May is wandering the streets, unable to remember that she is supposed to be going to Big Joe's. She is now deathly afraid of white people, and of the snakes she sees them working with. She consistently sees a snake with the head of a white man with blue eyes, and is only surprised the white people are not worshiping the snakes. She repeats to herself that she is ready, and knows what she must do. She realizes she is wandering among the whites, and wonders why when she sees the flashing of blue police lights. Buddy Matlow tells her to get into the car, asks if she told anyone about his rape of her. She replies she did not, and he gives her whiskey. As she drinks, she knows her fight is not with Matlow, but with the snake. He fumbles with something in the glove compartment, and squirms in his seat as he talks to her of Beeder. He takes her to the woods and tells her to look at what he has for her. She looks, and sees a snake between his legs. She pulls a razor from her shoe, and castrates him, coming away with his penis in her hand. Matlow knows he is dying and asks Lottie May to wait, but she casually walks away. She goes to Beeder and lets her know she has cut the snake off. Beeder, interested, stops yelling and comes to Lottie, asking for the whole story. The two relate to one another that the thing haunting them occupied all of their time and energy. Beeder turns the television down, and tells Lottie May to listen to the dog in the other room as he struggles to survive the treadmill. Shep Martin and Doctor Sweet are talking together, discussing the rewards of being a physician when there is a knock at the door. The doctor answers it, only to find Buddy Matlow in a rain slicker. As he looks down, he realizes Matlow is covered in blood. Shep holds out his hand, and Matlow places his penis in his hand. Doctor Sweet faints.

Back at the trailer, Berenice tries to phone home, but gets no response. She is looking for Shep so he can join her at the school for the beauty contest. The group discusses beauty contests while Elfie gets the children ready for the sitter. Susan is still angry about the twirl off being called a tie, and Willard is angry he didn't see a fight between Susan and Candy. Berenice leaves to find Shep while the rest head to the school. In the truck, Elfie reminds Joe Lon she is not an idiot, and laments that he shouldn't treat her like one. When they get to the school, it is packed with people. As the group tries to get to the stage, a voice rings out, telling Willard and Joe Lon to get into a football position. They do so, and tackle a man coming from the bushes. Coach Tump Walker rises from the ground, greets the newcomers, and nearly fights with Deeter. Willard calms the situation, and Walker tells Willard to stay off the bottle. At the same time, he asks the ladies to pardon him as he has a drink. Luther Peacock, the local deputy, arrives, wondering what to do about the violent crowds. He notes the crowds have turned over several trailers in the park, and are now fighting. As a scream is heard, Joe Lon gives the keys to Elfie and asks her to return to the trailer so she isn't harmed. Soon after, the man Walker claimed was tainted, Tommy Hugh, arrives, noting the crowd is about to attack his trailer, filled with five hundred snakes. The principal arrives to start the beauty contest, but the crowd refuses to cooperate. Joe Lon vaults for the stage as Walker,



Deeter, and Willard face the crowd. A fight breaks out in front of the stage, and Deeter and Willard begin to be involved. As the beauty contestant struts across the stage, the crowd quiets, and Joe Lon gives the microphone back to the principal. Suddenly, the paper mache snake is lit ablaze and fights break out again.

Joe Lon makes his way to the road and to his store. He arrives, and Lummy fetches him whiskey while feeding the snakes. Lummy thinks to himself about killing Joe Lon, as he often does, but knows his place is as the "nigger". While around whites, he doesn't think of such things, but away from them, he is allowed to think such thoughts. Joe Lon gives Lummy a pint of good whiskey for free and calls his father. They drunkenly argue, and Joe Lon begins to cry, his voice thickening as he screams at his father. Lummy simply waits to be relived. As Joe Lon begins to scream about having a family reunion, Lummy recognizes his sobbing and anguish as that which men are not supposed to see, and leaves the store.

Part Two: Pages 122-151 Analysis

Lottie May has clearly gone temporarily insane in this section. Seeing snakes and fearing them to be in cahoots with the white man, Lottie May relates snakes to her rape. When Matlow again captures her, she is ready. Matlow's castration, foreshadowed throughout the book, is not a surprise. He has put on one of condoms he purchased earlier in the novel, and as a result Lottie May sees a snake. She does as instructed, in that she uses a razor to kill it. Lottie May does not knowingly kill Buddy Matlow, but instead simply kills that which caused her insanity. Her return to Beeder shows her to be triumphant, and their conversation shows Beeder does understand the world around her, but chooses to ignore it and hide from it. Unable to kill that which haunts her, Beeder is only able to hide, but Lottie May is able to kill her fears. Beeder's ability to turn down the television, along with her comments that her father will "tie everyone on it", shows she fears her father but understands her insanity. Again, in this section, there is reference of a snake as a link to sexuality.

The scene at Doctor Sweet's home serves a number of purposes. First, based on Doctor Sweet's reactions, it is clear he has not dealt with much as a doctor. Unable to stand the sight of the castrated penis and the massive amounts of blood, Doctor Sweet faints instead of being able to help his patient. Simultaneously, Shep is unable to deal well with being handed a castrated penis. He looks to Doctor Sweet for a lead, but receives no instruction. Again, in this section, a snake is referenced as a symbolic representation of a sexual organ.

Berenice's departure to find Shep shows her devotion to him and her separation from Joe Lon. The charged violence among the group foreshadows the violence at the school. Elfie's comments to Joe Lon in the truck foreshadow not only her reactions to the knowledge that Joe Lon and Berenice had sex, but also show Elfie to be a stronger character than initially realized. She is not stupid, but sees how Joe Lon treats her and disapproves. While she is willing to accept many things, she does have a limit. Again in this scene, Coach Walker is shown as a less than desirable role model as he



encourages violence between the boys, and inadvertently encourages the drinking of alcohol through his example. As the crowds get wilder, Joe Lon shows his leadership skills, but when the crowd turns against him, he flees, knowing his friends will join in the violence. The increasing violence of the crowd and the introduction of the "tainted" man, Tommy Hugh, foreshadow the killing of his snakes later in the novel.

Joe Lon's drunken confrontation with his father show again his spiral into insanity. He is clearly angry with his father about his mother, and about his sister's insanity, but is unable to confront his anger when sober. Instead, he attacks his father in a drunken state, caring little about who sees his outrage. Lummy, conversely, does not fear Joe Lon, but instead dreams of killing him. However, when Joe Lon begins to sob, even Lummy realizes his position is not one to be viewed, and leaves. Such an event shows clearly that Joe Lon is heading for destruction.



Part Two: Pages 151-177

Part Two: Pages 151-177 Summary

The castration and death of Matlow spreads quickly through the town. Rumors spread that his penis was packed in ice to sew back on, and that he was taken to various hospitals. Willard, Coach Walker, and Deeter arrive to tell Joe Lon of the event the next day, and they travel with him to Big Joe's for the dog fight. The park is a mess with trash, crashed cars, and wrecked trailers. While Coach Walker first tries to stop Willard from drinking, he relents. Willard notes that he loves Deeter, who fought the crowd the prior evening bravely. When they arrive, Joe Lon takes Tuffy to the pit for grooming, as is customary for the champion dog. He speaks softly to the dog for several minutes, but is afraid when he raises his head and sees Berenice and Elfie sitting by one another, whispering. Willard comes down and explains that Matlow is dead. Joe Lon sends Willard up for whiskey, and Elfie comes down. She tells him Berenice has told him of their affair, and showed her the details. She wonders if Joe Lon doesn't love her, because he has never placed his penis in her mouth and anus in the same night, and has told Berenice that such actions means true love. She tells Joe Lon she can no longer look at her children, since he has shamed her. As she leaves, Berenice comes down to talk to him. He threatens to kill her, but she explains that on hearing of the death of Matlow, she felt remorse, and told everyone, including Elfie and Shep. She leaves, and Shep comes down. Shep admits he knows of his and Berenice's fling and forgives him. As Joe Lon walks Tuffy around, Shep tells him Matlow meant for him to tell Joe Lon something, but that he died before he could complete the request. As they talk, preacher Victor and Mother Well come to the pit and begin preaching. Joe Lon begins to howl, and passes out. He wakes up in his father's house, where Elfie is apologizing for her words to him. Willard tells him they were afraid he was going insane, so didn't take him home. He admits to himself that his life scared him, and that his misery made him doubt his ability to live the rest of his life. Willard notes that he would appreciate it if Joe Lon went insane without him. Joe Lon rises and goes to help with Tuffy. When they reach the ring, he sits with his father, who assures him that Matlow's castration is all that ails him. Willard is allowed to handle Tuffy, and Deeter, Susan, Candy, and Poncy sit in the stands. The fight begins, and Tuffy takes hold of the other dog's throat. The dogs shake loose, and Tuffy is cut through the stomach. Both bleed profusely, but after a break, both are back in the ring. Tuffy, against the rules, turns away, and Big Joe leaps down from the bleachers, and kicks Tuffy to death.

The following morning, Walker is taking registration for the snake hunt after a night of violence and mayhem. Joe Lon, the night before, had stopped the crowd from tearing down his house by firing a shotgun into the crowd. Shortly, Tommy Hugh comes running toward Walker, screaming that the crowd is killing his only friend. He runs to the rescue to find the crowd killing Hugh's anaconda. Walker returns to find Luther, Willard, Joe Lon, and Deeter. Joe Lon seems distracted. He had gone to bed the night before, and allowed Elfie to snuggle up to him, promising things would be different. He realizes, though, that his life will never be different. As the hunters arrive, Joe Lon finds it hard to



speak. Joe Lon, at the top of the ridge, asks Luther to wait, but the handkerchief is lowered, starting the hunt. Joe Lon wonders what it is like to be where Beeder is, and remembers the night before, when he explained to her that he had to bury Tuffy. Poncy arrives as part of a team, and tells Joe Lon he forgives him for his actions. Joe Lon finds it impossible to speak as Coach Walker arrives. Preacher Victor arrives at the hunt and begins to preach. Suddenly sure of his actions, Joe Lon takes the rifle and shoots Victor, feeling finally in control. He also shoots Berenice, Luther, and another hunter. The crowd forces him into the pit of snakes, and he is killed. He imagines he sees Beeder and Lottie May watching him from the hills above.

Part Two: Pages 151-177 Analysis

The spread of Matlow's situation, albeit incorrectly, is symbolic of information in a small town. The scenery described in this section is an outward expression of the destruction occurring inside Joe Lon. When Coach Walker allows Willard to again drink, even though he knows such drinking has led Willard to trouble, shows again the lack of moral stability in the lives of these individuals. Berenice's inability to keep quiet about her affair with Joe Lon, while expected, still leads Joe Lon to fight with Elfie, and shows Berenice again to be a selfish individual. She not only told Elfie, but showed her the soiled sheets and told of their conversation, showing she has no concern for Elfie's feelings, or for Joe Lon. Elfie, for her part, actually shows herself here to be strong, in that she confronts Joe Lon. However, her reasons for the confrontation appear to be more related to his lack of love for her, as shown by his refusal to have deviant sex with her as he did Berenice. Elfie is ashamed, and actually speaks up for herself. When Joe Lon learns of Matlow's death, he is shocked, but does not guess it is Lottie May who is the murderer. When Shep tries to tell him of Matlow's conversation with him, Joe Lon begins to lose control. However, it is the preaching of Victor which appears to throw him over the edge. This foreshadows Victor's triggering of a response later in the novel when Joe Lon shoots him. Joe Lon's admittance of his fear of his life shows his inner fear, and foreshadows his eventual inability to continue living his failed life. Elfie's revocation of her previous statements shows again her role as an abused wife, and shows she does love her husband. The death of Tuffy by Big Joe shows he is a cruel man, but also symbolizes his inability to care for others properly. Since Joe Lon has learned from his father, there is no question why the cycle of violence continues.

The killing of the anaconda in the next section shows the violence has reached a new high. In addition, Joe Lon's distracted air, combined with his admittance the night before that things will never get better, again foreshadow his actions at the end of the novel. When Victor arrives, Joe Lon is again triggered to action, and his slaughter of Berenice, Luther, a hunter, and Victor symbolizes his destruction of all things that ail him, much as his sister, Beeder, recommended to Lottie May. Berenice betrayed him, Luther represents the law that failed him, the hunter represents the snake hunt that threatened his sanity, and Victor represents the failed structure of religion. His death by snakes again brings together the concepts of snakes as symbols of evil and death. His imagining of Lottie May and Beeder watching him link together their acts as ways to escape that which they are unable to deal with.



Characters

Joe Lon Mackey

Joe Lon Mackey is an ex high school quarterback whose inability to read has left him in a mediocre life following graduation. Unable to follow his high school sweetheart, Joe Lon instead runs his father's liquor store, marries a woman who he doesn't love, and has children he seems to care little for. Joe Lon knows he was something in high school and cannot seem to get over his current life of mediocrity. He is angry and often abuses his wife. He doesn't hate her, as he shows in his frequent remorse for his actions, but he also doesn't respect her or love her. His constant anger allows him to find common ground with Willard, the current quarterback of the high school team. Together, the two are dangerous, as their anger and levels of violence escalate in relation to the others' behaviors. Joe Lon's family has a history of violence, substance abuse, and mental problems, and Joe Lon knows his life is less than it could have been. When his college educated high school sweetheart returns home from college with a new boyfriend, Joe Lon realizes his old life is over. As his rage escalates and he is forced to face his future, his behaviors become more and more out of control, culminating in the murder of several individuals. He is killed by snakes, an important symbol for sex, insanity, and morality throughout the novel, as the crowd throws him into the pit. Joe Lon symbolizes those who have no support structure such as family, school, or religion, and those whose social structures fail.

Willard Miller

Willard Miller is the younger version of Joe Lon. Angry and violent, Willard often competes with Joe Lon in terms of who can be the most vicious and violent. Willard, however, is somewhat educated. He seems to be able to read, which appears to be the cause of Joe's demise. His relationship with Candy is much like that between Joe Lon and Berenice when they were in school. Willard, however, seems more in control of his anger, and more able to control situations. He and Joe Lon often attack for no reason, and they seem to find the attacks amusing. But even Willard finds fault with Joe Lon's decision to have sex with Berenice with his wife just outside, and is unwilling to save him from Berenice and Elfie. While it is clear he cares for Joe Lon, and while he helps to drive him to the edge, he is unable or unwilling to go over the edge with him, as he shows at the rally. While he pushes Joe Lon to the stage, he is unable to join him there himself. In the end, he is spared during Joe Lon's killing spree. Willard represents those whose social structures do little to teach them morality.

Berenice Sweet

Berenice Sweet is the older daughter of a doctor, and a rather spoiled young woman. Having been head majorette in high school and having dated the captain of the team,



Berenice went off to college. She met a man, Shep, who is captain of the debate team. She falls in love with him, but still has lingering feelings for her ex boyfriend, Joe Lon. Berenice likes living on the edge, and enjoys pushing others to the same edge. She is a selfish character who cares little for others. When she arrives in town, she allows Joe Lon to have sex with her, knowing she is in love with Shep and that his wife is just outside. Later, however, she tells his wife of their sexual activity and even shows her proof of their infidelity. In the end, Berenice is killed by Joe Lon.

Hard Candy Sweet

Candy Sweet, known as Hard Candy, is the head majorette of the school, and is dating the quarterback of the football team, Willard. Candy is much like her older sister, in that she is selfish, highly sexual, and cares little for others. She and Willard go on a violent spree throughout the novel, and Candy seems to consistently egg others on into danger and destruction. She comes alive with violence, and encourages it in others. When Willard and Joe Lon are lifting with Duffy, Candy tells Susan they will fight, but seems not to care. At the bar, she encourages and even participates in the harassment and torment of Poncy. It is Candy who suggests her sister needs loosened up, which Joe Lon takes literally, and it is Candy who sets up the meeting between Joe Lon and Berenice at the trailer. While Candy plays a minor role in the plotline, it is her character that shows the cycle of behaviors perpetuated by her older sister.

Elfie Mackey

Elfie Mackey is the wife of Joe Lon, and the mother of his two children. Elfie is a loving wife and mother, but is constantly abused by her husband, who not only beats her but emotionally and verbally abuses her. Elfie cowers to her husband and clearly has a low self esteem. She puts up with Joe Lon's abuse and his drinking and even his habit of calling him by Berenice's name. However, when she is faced with his infidelity in her own home, Elfie tells Joe Lon she cannot look at her own children because he has made her ashamed. Later, however, she takes this back as Joe Lon begins to unravel. Elfie is a clear example in the story of a battered wife and of a woman who cares little for her self. She is the result of a culture of violence and alcoholism.

Buddy Matlow

Buddy Matlow is the sheriff of Mystic. As a powerful force in town, he often takes young black women in, claiming them to be prostitutes, in order to force them to have sex with him. Matlow eventually takes Lottie May, and scares her in a jail cell by threatening her with a snake. Buddy then has sex with her and threatens to kill her if she tells anyone. He releases her, but later arrests her again. Lottie May, however, castrates him, and he dies. Buddy Matlow's character represents those in power who abuse that power for their own personal gain.



Lottie May

Lottie May is an innocent young black woman who is the sister of George. She is falsely arrested by Buddy Matlow for prostitution and is forced to have sex with him. As a result of his use of snakes to frighten her, Lottie begins to hallucinate, seeing snakes everywhere. She speaks with Beeder, who is insane, and Beeder tells her to always carry a razor and to kill that which bothers her. Lottie May takes this piece of advice, and when Buddy picks her up again, she castrates him. She casually returns to Beeder, informs her of her deed, and the two talk casually of beating their fears. At the end of the novel, Joe Lon believes he sees Lottie May with Beeder, watching him.

Big Joe Mackey

Big Joe Mackey is the father of Joe Lon. He is nearly deaf and is semi-retired, having left his liquor store to his son. He raises fighting dogs and abuses them until they are violent and fierce. When his wife left him, he went and physically dragged her back, only to have her commit suicide. His daughter, Beeder, went insane, and his son wasn't successful following high school. Big Joe is a mean man, although he doesn't like Joe Lon beating his wife. His treatment of animals, his children, and everyone around him is a testament to the failure of the family in the novel to provide a support system for learning morality.

Beatriz Dargan Mackey (Beeder)

Beatriz Dargan Mackey, or Beeder, is the insane sister of Joe Lon. Having found her mother dead after committing suicide, Beeder became insane as a young teen and stopped leaving the house. She cares little for hygiene, urinates and defecates in a bowl under her bed, and watches television all day. She notes in the story to Lottie May that she should either kill what haunts her or find a place to hide. Beeder has chosen a hiding place within herself that no one is allowed to penetrate. She wishes often for death. Beeder represents the outcome of a situation with an abusive, alcoholic father and a horrific incident as a child.

Coach Tump Walker

Coach Tump Walker is a minor character in the novel, but another example of failed social structures. The coach clearly does care for his students, and watches out for both Joe Lon and Willard. However, when Willard drinks, fights, and acts immorally, the coach simply turns a blind eye. While he doesn't encourage drinking, he doesn't object to Willard's drinking either, even though he knows alcohol often leads to violence. Walker also doesn't help these men to curb their violent desires, but actively seems to promote them, showing another failure of the social system.



Preacher Victor

Preacher Victor is an odd character, a preacher from a snake handling church in Virginia. He is an older man covered with snake bites from his years as a handler, and his hair is white, coiled tightly against his head. On several occasions, he preaches about the link between God and man and snake. At one time, Victor rented a room in the Mackey house, and his father notes the preacher has been bit on the mouth from kissing snakes, and that he strings diamondbacks from his hair. Joe Lon finds both him and his companion, Mother Well, fascinating, and realizes they at least have something to have faith in, but that he does not. As Joe Lon works in the dog pits, Victor comes to him and begins preaching, which causes Joe Lon to begin violently howling just as the dogs begin to howl. Later in the novel, Victor urges on the hunters during the snake hunt, but when he begins preaching, he is shot by Joe Lon. Preacher Victor is another example of a failed social structure, that of religion.

Duffy Deeter

Duffy Deeter is a side character in the novel. As a lawyer, Deeter is a man who enjoys proving his masculinity. He likes pain, and enjoys rough sex and violence. His mistress, Susan, enjoys his dark company, and the two seem primed for violence throughout the novel. Throughout the novel, it is Deeter who seems to egg Joe Lon and Willard to even greater depths of violence than what they originally intend. Deeter's character plays the role of the nudge the boys need to push them over the edge of their violent tendencies, as they compete with one another to prove their masculinity.

Susan Gender

Susan Gender is the mistress of Duffy Deeter. Bored as a graduate student of philosophy at the University of Florida, Susan enjoys following Deeter around the country. She seems addicted to his energy, even through she realizes and admits he is a dangerous man. Susan encourages his and the other men's violence in the novel. She knows she is a beautiful woman and knows the men will outdo themselves to prove their manliness to her, and she seems to enjoy such competitions among the men.

Enrique Gomez (Poncy)

Enrique Gomez, or Poncy, represents the victim in the story. Poncy is a Cuban male who immigrated to the United States many years ago. From the beginning, Willard and Joe Lon treat Poncy with disrespect boarding on harassment. Poncy is threatened, abused, laughed at, forced to do things he wouldn't normally do, and generally tormented by Candy, Willard, and Joe Lon. Joe Lon almost feels pity several times in the novel, but such emotions are quickly clouded over by rage. In the end, however, Poncy forgives Joe Lon for his abuses, noting that his behaviors are natural. Such actions show Poncy as not only a victim in the story.



Objects/Places

The Rattlers

The Rattlers are the football team of Mystic, the setting of the story.

Mystic, Georgia

Mystic is a small town in Georgia that acts as the setting of the novel.

Sporting Lady

A sporting lady is a slang term in the novel for a prostitute.

Muntz

A Muntz is an older television set.

Miseries

The miseries often refer to an illness or sickness that is occasional, such as arthritis, in the novel.

Soda Crackers

In the novel, the term soda cracker is used to reference the poor white people in town.

Boss Rattler

The boss rattler is the quarterback of the football team.

Johnny-on-the-spot

A Johnny-on-the-spot is a portable toilet.

Anaconda

An anaconda is a specific non-venomous snake.

Mystic Rattlesnake Roundup

The Mystic Rattlesnake Roundup is an annual celebration in Mystic each year that culminates with a snake hunt.

Themes

Failure of Social Structures

One theme that resounds throughout the entire novel is that of the failure of all social structures in the lives of the characters to provide a moral basis for life. Joe Lon, the primary character, has a clearly dysfunctional family who has taught him nothing about the value of love, honor, respect, or moral living. His father is an alcoholic, his mother committed suicide, and his sister is insane. While his father doesn't agree with Joe Lon's abuse of his wife, he himself treats his animals horribly and cruelly. This doesn't provide Joe Lon with a solid base for learning to treat others well. Big Joe, the father, has operated a liquor store his entire life, and has drunk most of the profits, which again taught Joe Lon immoral practices. In addition, Joe Lon's own family is a testament to dysfunction. Joe Lon beats his wife, who does little to protect herself. She raises Joe Lon on a platform, and refuses to stop him from treating her and her children in a negative way. The community at large, including local law enforcement, also fails to provide the characters with any moral basis. The sheriff, Buddy Matlow, makes a habit of arresting young black women on false charges and raping them. The local coach is an alcoholic who encourages his star players to drink and fight, only stopping to caution them against severe violence. Even parents, such as Dr. Sweet, seem to notice little about the abhorrent behaviors of their children, and do little to teach them moral behaviors. In addition, religion has little effect on the behaviors of the characters, but this has much to do with the irregular behaviors of local preachers. Victor is a local parishioner, but his brand of religion revolves around using snakes as props to show the evils of Satan. His method of spreading his word is to grasp snakes and preach loudly.

Deviant Sexual Behavior

Another theme in this novel is the deviant sexual behaviors of the characters. Joe Lon is a married man with two children. He is first seen in the novel at the football field, watching the younger sister, Candy, of his old girlfriend, Berenice, as she practices being a majorette. He later has a nightmare and screams Berenice's name as he drunkenly has sex with his wife. Joe Lon then has sex with Berenice with his wife and sons just outside. He anally penetrates Berenice before having her orally satisfy him. Berenice, too, appears to enjoy such behaviors. In the novel, she often fantasizes about snakes, and the feel of their scales on her skin. She enjoys the actions of Joe Lon, even though she herself has a boyfriend. Buddy Matlow, the sheriff, frightens women with snakes, and rapes the women. As Duffy Deeter has sex with Susan Gender, he thinks of concentration camp victims, death, destruction, and murder. Candy Sweet seems to become aroused at violence. Clearly, throughout the novel, the characters thrive on dangerous and deviant sexual acts. They are bored with their own lives because of the mediocrity of existence. As a result, they continue to pursue sexuality on a lower and lower level, needing to link violence with sex in order to achieve satisfaction.



Violence

Violence plays a central theme throughout the novel. Joe Lon is, by nature, a violent person who often takes his frustrations out on his wife. In addition to the physical abuse he heaps onto her, Joe Lon finds others to abuse, such as Enrique Gomez. Joe Lon's father, Big Joe, is equally violent. He breeds fighting dogs and abuses them horribly to toughen them up for the ring. Willard Miller picks fights with everyone throughout the novel, including priests and those he doesn't know. Joe Lon and Willard nearly kill Poncy through their abuse. Duffy Deeter thinks of death as he makes love to his girlfriend, and finds fights wherever possible as well. The crowd at the snake festival is a violent mass as they gather together, and a mob breaks out. Even Joe Lon's sex with Berenice is violent. Lottie May's castration of her rapist, the sheriff, while seemingly dreamlike in the novel, is an extremely violent act, showing that even this small, innocent girl is not immune to the draw of violence as a solution to problems. Even Joe Lon's mother, who was pulled back to life with Big Joe against her will, used violence to escape as she committed suicide to avoid continued life with him and her two children. Fights break out consistently at the snake festival, and in the end, Joe Lon uses violence to end his own spiral into madness. It is clear that in the lives of these characters, violence is used as both an escape and an outlet for feelings of jealousy, anger, and failure.

Style

Point of View

The point of view used in the novel is third person. This viewpoint is necessary in that the thoughts and actions of a variety of characters is vital in presenting the themes of sexuality, violence, and morality throughout the novel. This point of view is also reliable, as shown by the constant knowledge of not only actions by the characters, but also of inner motivations and emotions. The extreme violence and downward spiral into insanity would not be as clear if the narrator was not able to discover the actions, thoughts, and emotions of all characters. The story is mostly told through descriptive narrative with small patches of dialog. This allows the reader to focus on the external reasons for character behaviors, such as the poverty of the area, the failure of school and other institutions, and the influences of others in the small town. Much of the novel is spent examining the psyche of the protagonist, Joe Lon, in an effort to explain how his life has led to his demise and insanity. This examination would be difficult without the knowledge of actions and ideas of other characters, showing again a need for third person perspective. Finally, the third person perspective allows insight into the motivations of other characters, as well.

Setting

The novel is set in a small town in Georgia called Mystic. The town is portrayed as a poor, violent, Southern town with stereotypical culture that the author seems to magnify. Many of the town persons are poor, and live lives filled with alcohol addiction and violence addictions. The sheriff is abusive to black men and women, and abuses his position of power. The local black residents are all portrayed as working for white individuals and as people with little education. They are also portrayed as secretly hating the white families but as afraid to openly admit their anger. The white inhabitants, on the other hand, are portrayed as simply using blacks as workers and as suppliers of their seemingly never ending alcohol addictions. The main family in the novel, the Mackay's, is a dysfunctional family consisting of an alcoholic father who runs a liquor store and raises fighting dogs, a sister who is insane, and a mother who committed suicide. Joe Lon is presented as a stereotypical southern young man whose best years of his life were spent as a star high school quarterback. Unable to read, however, he is left behind in his small hometown to marry a woman he doesn't like, raise two children in a trailer, and generally live in hatred. The setting is important to the story in that it is within this stereotypical world that the characters exist day to day, and it is in part due to this world that they behave as they do. Joe Lon's decline into madness is, in part, due to the setting of the novel.



Language and Meaning

The language of the novel is extremely informal. While the descriptive passages are written normally, much of the dialog is written as these southern, illiterate characters speak phonetically. The descriptions are long and highly detailed, adding to the overall comprehension of the setting so important to the novel. While the dialog adds to the believability of the characters, the phonetic writing style makes the dialog difficult at times to understand. However, the added depth to characters does allow the reader to gain a deeper understand of their inner thoughts and motivations.

The language of the novel also tends to characterize the different socioeconomic standings of the characters involved. Whereas Berenice, Candy, and Shep speak with an educated tone and wording that suggests an educated background, Joe Lon, Elfie, Big Joe, Ellie May, and others speak phonetically, implying an uneducated background. Further, such language adds to the image of violence embedded into daily life, helping to convey the desolate situation these characters exist in. However, again, this style of writing during dialog does, at times, require the reader to reread passages in order to understand who is speaking, and what was actually said. Beeder, in particular, is difficult to understand as her language is often symbolical and filled with hidden meaning that the reader has to comprehend in order to understand the happenings in the scene.

Structure

The novel is a short 177 pages. The book is comprised of two parts of unequal length. The first part of the book, Part One, appears to give the backstory of the characters, and show their lives as they currently exist. In Part Two, the character's lives spiral out of control and into violence and madness. The story is told through a combination of description and dialog. The plot of the novel is simple, with a few subplots. The main character of the novel, Joe Lon, is a young man whose life is a disappointment from the moment he graduates high school. He both loves and hates his wife and his children, and equally has a love/hate relationship with his father and sister. His existence is limited by his inability to read and by his own inability to feel love or motivation. His life spirals into madness as he is forced to face a lifetime of continued misery, and as he is forced to face that his old life as a success has not been in existence for several years. The pace of the novel is perfect, in that the beginning is slower, allowing the backstory to be told in depth. The second portion of the novel speeds up to a dizzying pace by the last few pages, which adds to the impression of mayhem and madness intended. The novel is an entertaining read about one man's journey into madness, but some scenes can be disturbing for some.



Quotes

"A cold bath of snakes...I'm freezing full of snakes. All in my blood. Crawling through my heart." Part One, p. 31

"He somehow managed to get what he wished was true confused with the facts of his own life. It wasn't the first time it had ever happened. It was a little quirk his head had of working when he was lost in the sour mist of bourbon whiskey." -Part One, p. 55

"Victor said: "The great dragon was cast out. The old serpent called the devil and Satan which deceiveth the whole world. He was cast out into the earth and his angels were cast out with him." Part One, p. 76

"Duffy Deeter loved young jocks like these who thought they were strong. They always looked as though they had an aluminum cup in their pants and a helmet on their heads. Their universal contempt for anything weaker than they were showed in their faces as a kind of stunned bemusement." Part Two, p. 84

"A hundred and fifty pound guy who could get three hundred pounds on the bench was nobody to fuck with. It meant that somewhere there inside him was a little knot of craziness that made him pay the price." Part Two, p. 97

"He hadn't meant to hurt the old man, but he knew he had. he eased his hands down onto his flat hard stomach. Something in him was tearing loose. He felt it going more and more out of control." - Part Two, p. 109

"White people were dangerous and snakes were dangerous and now the two were working together, each doing what the other told it to do." - Part Two, p. 122

"Hit tetched me all the living while. Went to sleep with me, snake did. Woke up with me. Eat my food. Come in the front door with me, went out the back. Wore my skin like clothes." Part Two, p. 132

"His job was to be the nigger...That's the way it had to be as long as he was around a white man. As soon as he was not around a white man, he quit being a nigger and thought about many, many things that he did not ordinarily think about. One of the things he thought about was killing Mr. Joe Lon." - Part Two, p. 149

"And it was not any one thing that scared him. It was everything. It was his life. His life terrified him. He didn't see how he was going to get through the rest of it. He was miserable beyond measure. Everything seemed to be coming apart. He could see the frayed and ragged seams of everything slowly unraveling." Part Two, p. 161

"Finally, all of them, even the children, were standing in the snake. There was an enormous amount of guts and blood and it didn't smell good at all." Part Two, p. 169



"Then he had gone carefully to sleep, a deep dreamless sleep, because he knew and accepted for the first time that things would not be different tomorrow. Or ever. Things got different for some people. But for some they did not." Part Two, p. 170

"He fell into the boiling snakes, went under and came up, like a swimmer breaking water. For the briefest instant, he gained his feet. Snakes hung from his face." Part Two, p. 177



Topics for Discussion

One of the main topics of the novel is the link between alcohol and violence. Choose one scene from the novel that displays this theme. Explain what happens in the scene. Why do you think this shows a link between alcohol and violence? Do you think the situation would have happened without alcohol? Why or why not?

Compare and contrast the characters of Willard and Joe Lon. How are they similar? How are they different? Do you think Willard will end up like Joe Lon? Why or why not? What is the fundamental difference between the two that may cause a different life?

The women of the novel are portrayed as helpless, uneducated, insane, or promiscuous in many cases. Are there any female characters in the novel who are portrayed as strong women? If not, why do you suppose the author chose this? If so, which characters, and why do you believe they are portrayed as stronger females?

There are clear racial issues between the characters in the novel, even though outwardly the races seem to live in peace. What are some examples of these race issues? Why do you think such issues exist in the novel? Be sure to explain your answer using information from the novel.

Sexual deviance is another theme throughout the novel. Why do you think characters such as Joe Lon are sexually deviant? Why do you think the fantasies of Deeter are filled with violence and anger? Does such sexual deviance link to underlying violent personalities? Why or why not?

When Elfie learns of Joe Lon and Berenice's affair, she notes that she can no longer look at her own children because she is so ashamed. After he blacks out, however, Elfie is at his bedside, noting that she still loves him and that everything is fine. What does this say about Elfie's character? Why would she choose to stay with a man who cheated on her? Do you agree with her decision? Why or why not?

At the end of the novel, Joe Lon kills Berenice, a hunter, Victor, Luther, and several others. Why do you think Joe Lon did this? Do you think it was intentional, or premeditated? Why or why not? Do his actions suggest insanity? What does his statement that he feels finally in control indicate? Be sure to explain your answer using information from the book.