

Florida Study Guide

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Plot Summary

At the age of five, Alice Fivey's father dies in a mysterious car accident and she loses her mother to a mental asylum at the age of ten. Orphaned, Alice is left to live with relatives, and is moved from one set of relatives to the next. As she slowly matures into a young woman, her caregivers shape Alice's identity.

Alice leads an unstructured, carefree life with her mother, but together their lives are unstable and uncertain. Alice never wears fashionable new clothing, but wears clothing that her mother makes. Alice doesn't take luxurious vacations with her mother. She dreams of moving to Florida. The instability of the household is further eroded by her mother's bad habit of entering into relationships with foul-tempered men who spend their time drinking rather than working. When it becomes clear that Alice's mother cannot care for Alice properly, her mother is sent to a mental asylum, and Alice is left in the care of her relatives.

At first, Alice lives with her Uncle Billy and Aunt Frances until she is 13 years old - she never gets beyond feeling like a guest her uncle's home. Uncle Billy and Aunt Frances are a wealthy couple who provide a stable household for Alice during her three-year stay. Every March, they take Alice to their vacation home in Arizona. Although Alice has the luxury of wearing fancy shoes and clothing, swimming in her uncle's private pool, and learning to ride horseback, she must submit to the rules of the household. Aunt Frances insists that Alice learn proper manners and for Alice, this means asking permission before doing anything and doing her best to appease her relatives so that she can continue to enjoy the luxuries that are offered to her.

Alice then moves to live with her grandmother Nonna for a few years until she moves out at an unspecified age. While living with Nonna, Alice has more freedom because Nonna is elderly and cannot keep a watchful eye over Alice. During this time, Alice's spending time with boys is reminiscent of the way in which her mother interacted with men.

Despite the ways in which Alice seems to take after her mother, she finally moves to New York. Although Alice continues to have trouble in her relationships with men, Alice is a strong independent woman. She finds a stable job as an English teacher.

When Alice is a young woman, she reconnects with her mother, and spends her summer vacations visiting with her in California. As Alice finds meaning in her life through inspiring her students, her mother's life is on the decline. Over the years, Alice's mother becomes very unhealthy, and she is admitted to a nursing home. Ultimately, when Alice reaches a point in her life where she is happy with herself and the life she has made for herself in New York, she is forced to witness a second, quite different, loss of her now elderly mother.



Part 1: Mother - Arthur

Part 1: Mother - Arthur Summary

This section opens with a description of Alice's mother whom Alice simply calls "Mother." In particular, Alice describes Mother's unusual behavior. Among other things, Mother rubs her back against parts of the house, backs into corners, slides out from under curtains, and beats broomsticks against the floor. When Mother talks, she speaks as though her thoughts are elsewhere.

Mother and Alice live with Walter. Walter spends his time listening to classical music and drinking whiskey. Walter's relationship with Mother is troubled, if not abusive. Mother's relationship with Walter is contrasted with her relationship with Alice's father whom Alice calls "Father." Alice recalls an episode from her past before Father died. Father spoke of taking Mother and Alice to Florida. They all regard Florida like a kind of utopia. Florida is a place where the family will not have to endure harsh winters. It is a place where the sun always shines and where there is an abundance of sweet ripe fruits. Eventually, Walter leaves Mother and Alice.

One winter, Mother is sent to a mental asylum, which she calls "the San." Arthur works for Mother's sister-in-law whom Alice calls, "Aunt Frances," and he always drives Mother to the "San." Alice likens Mother's admittance to the "San" as her voyage to her own Florida.

Part 1: Mother - Arthur Analysis

The opening section serves two purposes. It paints a portrait of Mother, and informs the reader of the dramatic difference between Alice and Mother's life when Father was still alive and that of their life after Father's death.

Mother's portrait is fleshed out in two ways. First, her unusual behavior is described, and it suggests that Mother is not mentally well. Second, it provides a glimpse of Mother's troubled relationships with men. Walter seems to have no respect for Mother, and he verbally abuses her by calling her, "Stupid." Walter contributes little to the managing the household, and we discover Mother seems to attract men who are lazy. This suggests that after Father's death, Mother consistently finds herself in emotionally, psychologically, and perhaps even financially draining relationships with men. Consequently, she is never able to establish a stable, loving, healthy family environment. Mother's unhealthy relationships with men are probably factors that contribute to her already fragile psychological condition.

Alice and Mother's life with Walter is contrasted with their life with Father. Walter's presence is an imposition. His music is oppressive. He never laughs, and since he doesn't seem to work, he does nothing to contribute to the maintenance of family life. In effect, Walter does nothing to enhance the mood of the family, and if anything, his



presence seems to bring sadness to Alice's home. In contrast, Alice's memory of Father suggests that Father made an effort to manufacture hope and happiness by talking about Florida. Although it is not explicitly clear whether Father has the genuine intention to take his family to Florida, at the very least, Father makes an effort to give his family hope by telling them about Florida.

The way that Alice became orphaned is presented. She has already lost Father, and now, she also loses Mother. Alice expresses some confusion about her mother's departure. Alice thinks that there are good reasons for Mother to stay with her. After all, Alice is Mother's daughter, and it is only natural to expect that a mother would stay with her daughter. Moreover, Alice and Mother share the same name. So, it is suggested that the relationship between Alice and Mother could be understood not just in terms of the mother-daughter relation, but also the identity-relation. Mother is the first person in Alice's life to play a significant role in shaping Alice's identity.



Part 1: Mother - Arthur

Part 1: Mother - Arthur Summary

Alice is ten years old when Mother is sent to the "San." After Mother's admittance to the "San," Alice goes to live with relatives. Alice lives mostly with Uncle Billy and Aunt Frances. Uncle Billy is Mother's brother. As soon as Alice arrives, Aunt Frances imposes her will on Alice, and she is only allowed to talk about living persons. Alice's picture books are replaced with other books that Aunt Frances deems more suitable. Alice is given a new hair cut, and her clothing is taken to be name-tagged.

Alice doesn't particularly like Uncle Billy's house, and she prefers to spend her time visiting the neighborhood where she and Mother used to live. Alice would have Arthur drive her to her old neighborhood and stop in a discreet place where her former neighbors could not see Alice.

When Alice first moves to live with Uncle Billy, Mother sends her letters and gift packages that suggest that Mother still clings to her fantasy of living in Florida. One of the cards that Mother sends to Alice depicts a beachfront high-rise, and Mother claims to live in the high-rise. Mother sends Alice clothing that is clearly meant to be worn in tropical climates.

Before Mother went to the "San," Arthur made Mother a "homemade Florida." That is, Arthur built Mother a sunbathing bed made from foil. Mother used to lie in the "homemade Florida" and wave at Alice and the rest of the neighbors.

In the springtime, Alice vacations with Uncle Billy and Aunt Frances at their house in Arizona. Although this trip is meant to be a vacation, Uncle Billy is also using it as a business trip. Uncle Billy has plans to make a lot of money in the desert.

Alice's relationship with Arthur is described as feeling sorry for him because his life seems lonely. Alice often wants to visit Arthur because she thinks that doing so would bring happiness to Arthur. However, Uncle Billy usually denies her requests to visit Arthur.

Part 1: Mother - Arthur Analysis

In the previous section, it was suggested that Mother has some influence in shaping Alice's identity by being her mother and sharing the name "Alice" with her. Now that Mother is separated from her daughter, her relatives mold Alice's identity. Aunt Frances seems to have the most important role in crafting Alice's identity; she regulates what Alice is allowed to say, read, and wear.

Although wealth has been suggested in earlier sections, we now get more evidence that Uncle Billy and Aunt Frances are very wealthy. Uncle Billy is a businessman who has



amassed enough money that he can afford a vacation home in Arizona. There seems to be little evidence that Uncle Billy and Aunt Frances are truly happy because Arthur implies that Mother was the only one in the family who was able to be happy.

Arthur's claim is reinforced by the contrast between Arizona and Florida. Arizona is warm and holds the promise of financial gain for Uncle Billy. However, Arizona is primarily desert, and is not the kind of environment that can support the growth and development of fragile life. In contrast, Florida (described by Father) has an abundance of vegetation from which the sweetest, ripest fruit can be harvested. Arizona and Florida are each rich in their own way. Arizona offers financial wealth, but an environment that stifles life. Florida, on the other hand, offers richness of life, but there is no mention of monetary gain.

Arthur claims that Mother is, in a sense, the happiest and most generous person in the family. Although Alice claims to have forgotten her mother's generosity, we see that Alice is capable of a certain kind of generosity. Of course, Alice hasn't any money to give to Arthur, but Alice does have her company and attention to offer. Alice, perhaps rather naively, tries to make Arthur's life better by befriending him.

At the end of this section, we see that sometimes Alice can be selfish. Alice enjoys riding piggyback on Arthur. Sometimes, even when Arthur is tired, Alice insists on being carried by Arthur. Episodes such as these show that although Alice strives to be a good person - she can't be good all of the time. This makes Alice's character seem very realistic and one to which any of us can relate.



Part 1: Mother - Arlette's Stories

Part 1: Mother - Arlette's Stories Summary

In this section, we get another portrait of Mother before her entrance to the "San." Mother is a flamboyant and creative woman. Once, she decorated ordinary-looking straw bags and turned them into "stories with dollhouse trinkets." Another time, Mother took some fruits that were about to spoil and used them to make a Christmas mantle-piece.

The summer that Alice is 12 years old, Uncle Billy hosts a party in June. Uncle Billy mentions how Mother might return and want Alice back, and he asks what Alice thinks about it. Alice seems to have ambivalent feelings about returning to Mother. On one hand, she is tired of living as a guest, and she misses Mother. On other hand, Mother's life is uncertain, disorderly, and sometimes embarrassing to Alice.

Part 1: Mother - Arlette's Stories Analysis

There is the impression that Mother is unappreciated or under-appreciated by family members. Nonna, Alice's grandmother, criticizes Mother for selling her decorated straw bags. At Christmas, when Mother brings her homemade gifts for family members, they seem not to know how to react. They are always surprised. They protest her extravagance, but they seem pleased with the gifts.

It seems that Mother does not fit well with other family members, but she doesn't seem bothered by this. She has enough self-confidence and independence that she continues to pursue her creative projects despite her family members' lack of clear encouragement.

Alice is conflicted. On one hand, life with Uncle Billy and Aunt Frances is stable. There is enough money that Alice will not be deprived of food or clothing. Uncle Billy and Aunt Frances can afford to give Alice things that her mother could never afford to give her such as cochina slippers and ruffled skirts. However, Alice does not feel at home with Uncle Billy and Aunt Frances. She still feels like a guest in their home. Alice didn't have to behave like a guest with her own mother, but on the other hand, Mother was unpredictable and unstable.



Part 1: Mother - Tuscon

Part 1: Mother - Tuscon Summary

Aunt Frances and Arlette are in charge of unpacking and organizing all of the items that were recovered from Mother's home after Mother was sent to the "San." Alice is only allowed to look at her Mother's possessions, but not allowed to touch. We discover that at the age of twelve, Alice swears to herself that she will not become like her mother, but she also secretly misses Mother dearly.

When Alice is 12 years old and on her annual spring trip to Arizona with Uncle Billy and Aunt Frances, Aunt Frances speaks to Alice about money. It is revealed that Mother had a share of "the family money," but the money was quickly spent. Arthur defends Mother claiming that Mother was very generous and often gave valuable items away. He explains that his Magnavox stereo, for example, was a gift from Mother.

Aunt Frances also uses this opportunity to explain to Alice that there are rules to how one should conduct one's life. One needs to learn manners, how to make beds, how to fold napkins, and how to make simple economic decisions. It is implied that Alice did not learn any of this from Mother.

Aunt Frances hires "unreliable" local help during their trip to Arizona. The "unreliables" sometimes talk to Alice, and they complain that Aunt Frances is bossy. The "unreliables" seem to think that they are in the same boat with Alice, because they ask her if she is unhappy as they are.

Part 1: Mother - Tuscon Analysis

There is an effort on the part of Alice and others to shape Alice into a person who is different from Mother. Aunt Frances and Arlette's prohibition against Alice's touching Mother's former possessions suggest that there is a forced distance between Alice and her mother. Even Alice declares that she is nothing like, and doesn't want to become like her mother.

Despite these efforts to drive a wedge between Alice's identity and that of Mother, Alice is still drawn to Mother. Alice finds herself sneaking around in her mother's possessions and touching Mother's crystal glasses. Even though Alice promises herself to become someone different from Mother, she finds herself asking Arthur to drive her to the San to be near Mother.

Aunt Frances's discussion about learning rules and manners suggests that there is orderliness to her household, and that if Alice is to fit into the household, she must submit herself to the household rules. By imposing rules on Alice, Aunt Frances is, for better or for worse, imposing constraints on how Alice conducts her life and develops as a person.



In spite of the strict rules Aunt Frances imposes on Alice and her servants, the "unreliables" think that Alice's position isn't that different from theirs. Alice doesn't feel like a genuine family member in Aunt Frances's household. This reinforces Alice's earlier observation that she felt like a guest in Uncle Billy's home.



Part 1: Father - Mother

Part 1: Father - Mother Summary

Some of the vague details of Father's death are now revealed. Father drove off one night when Alice was 5 years old, and he never returned. Father died in the river that flows under Main Street. There is a hint that Father's death was possibly a suicide because there is the suggestion that Father was unhappy.

After falling ill, Arthur recovers and returns to driving Alice around. Alice shows concern for Arthur's health. If he looks tired, Alice asks him if he wants to rest and joins him for a nap in the car. Sometimes, they wake up hungry, and Alice expresses some worry about whether the chocolate that Arthur is about to eat will cause him harm.

More trips to Tucson are described. We discover how Alice adapts to life with Uncle Billy and Aunt Frances. With each trip to Tucson, Alice has new experiences. She swims in Uncle Billy's pool. She rides horses. She collects stones for jewelry.

Alice's one and only visit to her mother in the "San" is described. Mother is a wreck. Her wig is discolored. Her glue-on eyelashes have fallen off. She has grown too fat for her dress. There is an emotional discussion about the custody of Alice. Mother has lost custody of Alice because she is not fit to care for her daughter. Mother is crying publicly, and this embarrasses Alice.

Part 1: Father - Mother Analysis

This is the first impression that Father was not happy. Until this section, all that is known of Father is that he was the first to introduce his family to Florida, and as such, he seems to be a source of happiness - albeit a fabricated kind of happiness resulting from unrealistic daydreaming.

Alice's immersion in life in Tucson suggests that she is adapting in her own way to life with Uncle Billy and Aunt Frances. Life with Mother never included trips to Tucson or horseback riding or swimming in the private pool. These are the amenities that Alice is beginning to take for granted after living with Uncle Billy and Aunt Frances.

There is also the suggestion that there are limits to Alice's friendship with Arthur. Although Alice does show genuine concern for Arthur when she's riding with him, she doesn't seem to have any qualms about leaving Arthur at home sick while she is off enjoying herself in Arizona.

The extent of Mother's declining mental health is more obvious now. Mother is not even capable of caring for herself, and it is evident that she cannot care for Alice. Although Alice is embarrassed of Mother, Alice admits that even when Mother's company doesn't bring her pleasure, she still seeks Mother out. This suggests that despite the fact that

Mother cannot fulfill her role as Alice's caregiver, Alice instinctively knows that there is a bond between them, and their relationship never really disintegrates despite their separation.



Part 2: The Big House - Tucson

Part 2: The Big House - Tucson Summary

Alice is now 13 years old, and she goes to live with her grandmother, Nonna. Nonna's house is on the other side of the lake on which Uncle Billy's house is located. Nonna cannot take care of herself. Instead, Miss O'Boyle, her nurse, is in charge of feeding, washing, and dressing Nonna.

The "Big House" and the treasures stored within it are described. Nonna is apparently very wealthy. In her house, there is a lot of family jewelry, precious silverware, and valuable artwork. Many visitors come to call on Nonna. There is often speculation about who will inherit what from Nonna. Nonna often gives little gifts to Alice. When Uncle Billy and Aunt Frances discover what Alice has been given, they are extremely upset because they thought that they had a claim to some of those items.

Arthur is also responsible for maintaining Nonna's property in addition to all of his duties at Uncle Billy's residence. Arthur is clearly overworked, and Alice suggests that Arthur's accidental drowning resulted from a desire for relief from all the demands that were placed on him.

Part 2: The Big House - Tucson Analysis

The importance of language and communication is brought out by Nonna's frustrations. Although Alice can guess what Nonna wishes to communicate by paying close attention to Nonna's body language, Miss O'Boyle seems oblivious to Nonna's protests and wishes. Without the ability to express herself with language, Nonna cannot communicate effectively with others, and she can only hope that someone who is sensitive to her body language can detect the messages that she is trying to send to others.

Uncle Billy and Aunt Frances's preoccupation with material riches is further developed in this section. Although Uncle Billy and Aunt Frances are very wealthy and seem to have more than enough money to sustain a comfortable, if not luxurious, lifestyle, they can't help coveting Nonna's possessions. Uncle Billy has already claimed several of Nonna's paintings by writing his name on the back of the canvases.

This seems to suggest that wealthy persons such as Uncle Billy and Aunt Frances are never really content. They have more than they need, but they can't help wanting more. When they discover that someone else has what they have always wanted, it causes them distress. Thus, it seems that Uncle Billy and Aunt Frances, despite their material riches, can't ever be happy, or even, content.

Aunt Frances has a revealing conversation in which she acknowledges the importance of keeping her servants happy, so that they won't steal from her. Aunt Frances's words



show that she isn't concerned with her employees' happiness for its own sake. Rather, Aunt Frances is only interested in keeping her servants happy in order to prevent them from stealing her property. For Aunt Frances, keeping servants happy is a selfish act because she would be doing it to protect herself and her possessions.

Part 2: The Big House - Arlette's Stories

Part 2: The Big House - Arlette's Stories Summary

Alice is 15 years old now, and she is still living with Nonna. Alice has begun dating. She is somewhat reckless and is in the habit of coming home at all hours. Miss O'Boyle accuses Alice of being just like her mother. At this point, we discover that Mother has checked out of the "San" and is living with a man who was a fellow patient.

Arlette alleges that Nonna knocked Mother out with an oar once. Arlette suggests that this might explain why Mother is so psychologically unwell.

Part 2: The Big House - Arlette's Stories Analysis

It has now been about 5 years since Alice was separated from her mother. Despite their separation, Alice shows signs of having the same character traits and disposition as Mother.

Arlette has the role of reminding family members of their flaws. In this case, she is reminding Alice that Mother really is mentally unhealthy. Although her explanation for Mother's reason for being in the "San" is unscientific, it does suggest that Mother's commitment is no mistake.

Part 2: The Big House - Arthur

Part 2: The Big House - Arthur Summary

Nonna's relationships with her husband and her children are described. Nonna is described as having a "hardened heart." According to Mother, Nonna's husband took a mistress because he sought another woman love that Nonna couldn't or wouldn't give him. Mother blames Nonna's "hardened heart" for Nonna's favoring Uncle Billy over her. According to Mother, Nonna only had room in her heart for one of them, and she chose Uncle Billy. Mother's speculations about Nonna are not confirmed as facts.

Nonna's relationship with Alice consists of talking. Since Nonna can't speak, Alice "converses" with Nonna by interpreting Nonna's hand gestures. They "talk" about Mother and Father. It is unclear whether Nonna really is expressing her own opinion about Mother and Father or whether Alice is projecting what she hopes to be the case into Nonna's hand signals.

Alice's relationship to literature is discussed here. Alice is eager to please her high school English teacher, Mr. Early. Alice shows a sensibility for literature that does not go unnoticed by Mr. Early. Alice reveals to Mr. Early that Father had wanted to be a poet, and Mr. Early encourages her to become what Father can no longer become. Alice expresses doubts, but Mr. Early encourages her. These sections end with Alice leaving the "Big House."

Part 2: The Big House - Arthur Analysis

A legacy of troubled mother-daughter relationships is suggested in this section. Although Nonna was never sent to the "San," there is a sense in which Mother lost Nonna to Uncle Billy, or at the very least, Mother felt that she lost Nonna. Since Mother was under the impression that Uncle Billy was the only person for whom Nonna really cared, Mother was, in a sense, motherless. When it was Mother's turn to be a mother, she fails Alice as a mother since she is unable to meet her responsibilities to Alice, ultimately leaving Alice motherless too.

Alice has some literary talent. She enjoys reading, and she often has interesting and incisive comments on texts that she is studying for school. It seems that literature could be Alice's "Florida."



Part 3: The Big House - Mother

Part 3: The Big House - Mother Summary

An unspecified number of years have passed, and Alice is no longer living with Nonna or Uncle Billy. Alice has returned to the "Big House" for Nonna's funeral. Mother is not at the funeral because Uncle Billy neglected to inform her of Nonna's death in a timely fashion. By the time Mother found out, it was too late for her to make a trip to the "Big House" from California where she lives. Alice has inherited some money and some jewelry. Alice uses the money to buy an apartment in Manhattan on West 76th Street.

Alice reports what Nonna has to say about Mother. It is unclear whether this is actually what Nonna has to say or whether this is merely what Alice imagines that Nonna has to say. We discover that Nonna never wanted a second child after having Uncle Billy. She especially didn't want a daughter. Nonna seems to have a hard time understanding Mother. Nonna describes Mother as a precocious child who was loud and boisterous. According to Nonna, Mother fabricated stories, and among these false stories is the story of Nonna's husband taking a mistress .

Nonna's description of Father is also unflattering. According to Alice and Mother's fond memories of Father, we have been given the impression that Father brought some form of happiness to his family by talking to them about Florida. However, Nonna considered Father "mopey" and depressed.

Alice is visiting her mother in California. Alice has taken to calling Mother "the woman who said she was my mother." Mother lives alone with her many cats. When Alice visits her mother in California, Mother's condition is deteriorating. It is suggested that Mother has lost a lot of weight because she is bulimic. Mother has joint problems because she is growing crooked and has her hips replaced. Mother always asks Alice to stay for longer visits, but Alice can't because she must return to New York where she teaches. Although Alice does not admit this to anyone, she secretly wants to become a poet.

Part 3: The Big House - Mother Analysis

Although Mother has been in contact with Alice, Mother seems to be separated from other members of her family. It is unclear whether Mother's exile is entirely self-imposed or whether it is something that family members have forced upon her. It is likely that it is a combination of these two factors.

Nonna's discussion of Mother and Father shed some light on where Alice's literary talent originated. Mother is creative and artistic in a fantastic and flamboyant way. Father is poetic in a sad brooding way.

The fact that Alice now calls Mother "the woman who said she was my mother" suggests two things. Mother has changed enough so that Alice does not recognize her



as the mother she knew as a child, and Alice's relationship with Mother has evolved. Alice doesn't miss Mother the way she did when she was a child. Although she tells Mother that it is hard to leave California to return to New York, she doesn't really find it that hard.



Part 3: West Seventy-Six - Mother

Part 3: West Seventy-Six - Mother Summary

Alice lives in a brownstone on West 76th in Manhattan with her boyfriend. She calls him her very own "Walter." "Walter" is much older, and he is unattractive. He is aggressive and openly reprimands her whenever she does something that he doesn't like, such as showing up late for a date. "Walter" is particularly adept at hurting Alice's feelings, as illustrated by a time when he reminded Alice just how unimportant she is.

Alice argues a lot with "Walter." Like Mother's Walter, "Walter" is a harsh man who verbally abuses Alice. "Walter" drinks to console himself over the troubled relationship, and Alice smokes pot to console herself.

Alice asks "Walter" to move out of her brownstone, but he refuses to leave unless she pays him. She signs a document agreeing to pay him to leave, but before he is able to move out, he overdoses on Percodan and Scotch. Even though "Walter" is no longer alive to move out of Alice's apartment, the document that she signed is still binding, and Alice must pay money to "Walter's" estate.

Mr. Early dies, and Mrs. Early calls to inform Alice of this event. Alice is still teaching in New York. Mr. Early died while reciting a poem to a class that he was teaching. This causes Alice to recall various memories involving Mr. Early. Alice recalls how she had a crush on Mr. Early. She remembers promising to meet Mr. Early for coffee before she left Nonna's funeral and neglecting to fulfill her promise. She recalls falling ill at school once and how Mr. Early, in a fatherly gesture, came to visit her in the nurse's office. Finally, she recalls how she continued to maintain a correspondence with Mr. Early until his death. In his letters, Mr. Early often shared his own poems with Alice.

Another visit to Mother in California is described. On this visit, Alice and Mother talk about Uncle Billy and Aunt Frances. Mother is critical of her family, and she blames them for her misfortune. Rather unreasonably, Mother blames her family for somehow presenting a barrier to her finding "Florida" with Father, and blames her family for Father's death. During their conversation about Uncle Billy and Aunt Frances, Alice expresses relief that Mother lost custody of her.

Part 3: West Seventy-Six - Mother Analysis

This section illustrates the extent to which Alice repeats her mother's mistakes. She finds herself in an unhealthy relationship with an abusive man who is so much like Walter that Alice just calls him "Walter." Alice seems to recognize that "Walter" treats her badly, but she is unable to stop herself from entering into and staying in a relationship with him. In this way, Alice seems to be like Mother who, also, consistently found herself in unhealthy relationships with men.

Alice is desperate for "Walter" to get out of her life. She was willing to pay to have him leave. It also shows how unwise Alice is because she signs a legal document binding her to pay "Walter" for something for which she shouldn't have to pay.

To what extent Mr. Early plays the role of a father to Alice becomes clear. Like Father, Mr. Early is a poet. He is also a man with literary sensibilities. He encourages Alice to pursue her literary dreams. He also cares about her when she is ill.

Part 4: Arthur - Mother

Part 4: Arthur - Mother Summary

Arthur has died. He was driving a woman who had suffered a burn injury to the hospital. On the way to the hospital, Arthur felt unwell, pulled over, and died on the side of the road.

Alice returns to Uncle Billy's for Arthur's funeral. Alice openly criticizes Uncle Billy and Aunt Frances for not burying Arthur in the family plots. Uncle Billy and Aunt Frances defend themselves, claiming that they took care of Arthur in his ailing years, and that his funeral arrangements were already costing them a great deal.

On yet another summer trip to visit Mother in California, Alice and Mother talk about Father and the circumstances of his death. Although Uncle Billy believes that it was suicide, Mother refuses to believe it. Alice also discovers that Mother has been fabricating stories about Father's past. One of Mother's Californian friends asks Alice about Father's sculptures.

Part 4: Arthur - Mother Analysis

There seems to be some inconsistency in the details concerning Arthur's death. Arthur's future death is described as an accidental drowning, but in this section, the death is reported as a "peaceful passing" on the side of a road.

Mother seems to be in denial about Father. She doesn't acknowledge who Father really was. Instead, she goes around telling people that Father was a sculptor. Moreover, she can't accept the proposition that Father died in a suicide despite some evidence that this was in fact the case.



Part 4: West Seventy-Six - Mother

Part 4: West Seventy-Six - Mother Summary

Alice is now 30 years old. She is in a lawyer's office trying to determine how much money she owes to her "Walter's" estate. This causes her to think of hurtful people, but she tries to neutralize these thoughts with memories of kind people like Mr. Early and some of her college teachers of whom she was fond.

Mother has been moved to an assisted-living facility, which she calls "the Birdcage." To help with her own finances, Alice asks Mother to sign some bank documents that would presumably give Alice access to Mother's trust fund. Mother is dying, and she is looking more and more like Nonna.

One of Alice's rare visits to Mother in the assisted-living home is described. Mother barely recognizes Alice because she talks to Alice about Alice as though she weren't there. Mother's condition seems to be deteriorating fast.

Part 4: West Seventy-Six - Mother Analysis

Alice has developed a coping mechanism for dealing with people who hurt her or with memories of such people. Although Alice has had the misfortune of knowing harmful people such as "Walter," she has also been fortunate enough to know smart and caring people like Mr. Early.



Part 4: Any House - Florida

Part 4: Any House - Florida Summary

Alice is visiting Uncle Billy and Aunt Frances who are now both very elderly. They have moved from their lakeside home and permanently live in Arizona. Uncle Billy has trouble breathing and cannot join Alice and Aunt Frances on a jeep tour of the surrounding land. While Alice and Aunt Frances spend the day together, Frances confides in Alice that she misses Uncle Billy. Later that night, Alice notices how Uncle Billy and Aunt Frances talk to each other and pat each other's hands affectionately, and she is convinced that they are in love.

Alice describes Mr. Early's enthusiasm when he taught her high school English class. As an English teacher herself, she has inherited his duties to instill a love of literature into her own students. This is not a burden for Alice, she embraces these duties.

Alice prepares to say good-bye to Mother at the end of one of her visits to the nursing home. It is suggested that this may or may not be Alice's last visit to her mother.

Part 4: Any House - Florida Analysis

Alice learns an important lesson about the love between a husband and wife. Prior to this section, Uncle Billy and Aunt Frances have never been described as the kind of married couple who are in love, yet something about their marriage seems to work. In their old age, they are comfortable with each other, and they still feel affection for each other. These small gestures are all that is needed to sustain a loving marriage. Grand romantic gestures aren't necessary.

Alice is happy in her role as an English teacher. She has found her calling. When her students are engaged in the class readings, she has accomplished something. She reaches her students through literature.

Now it is Alice's turn to leave Mother. It is left unclear whether this will be Alice's last visit. This suggests that Alice feels conflicted about leaving Mother- never to see her again. This is reminiscent of young Alice's ambivalent feelings with regard to her separation from Mother.



Characters

Alice

Alice is the main character who also narrates the story of her life. Since her father's death at the age of 5, she lives with her mother and her mother's boyfriends. Her life with her mother is unstable. When it becomes clear that her mother cannot provide Alice with the care that she needs, her mother is sent to a mental asylum. At the age of 10, Alice moves to live with her Uncle Billy and Aunt Frances. Uncle Billy and Aunt Frances bring some much-needed stability to Alice's childhood, but Alice never becomes fully integrated into Uncle Billy's household. Alice can't help feeling like a guest in their house, especially since Aunt Frances expects Alice to follow strict rules of conduct during her stay. When Alice is 13, she moves again to live with her grandmother Nonna. Nonna is quite elderly and is not in a position to regulate Alice's behavior to the same extent that Aunt Frances did. As such, Alice enjoys more freedom during her stay with Nonna, and when she is left unconstrained by household rules, Alice finds herself gravitating towards behavior that is reminiscent of her mother's conduct. Although Alice sometimes finds herself acting like her mother, she does manage to build a respectable stable life for herself. Ultimately, Alice ends up in New York where she teaches English.

Mother

Alice's mother is also named "Alice." Mother is a flamboyant character who is imaginative and creative. When Mother finds old straw bags in the house, she decorates them, and her work is so impressive that neighbors purchase her creations. When Mother finds old fruits in the pantry, she uses them to make a mantle-piece. Mother also likes to fantasize about moving to Florida, and to feed this fantasy; she sometimes lies in the front lawn sunbathing in a makeshift sunning bed. Mother's inclination toward fantasies and fictions render her grip on reality quite fragile, and by the time Alice is 10 years old, it becomes apparent that Mother cannot care for Alice. Mother loses custody of Alice and is sent to a mental asylum. While Alice is living with relatives, Mother leaves the asylum, but she does not re-claim custody of Alice. Alice is re-united with Mother only after Alice has begun living independently. By then, Alice lives in New York and only visits Mother in California during her summer vacations. As Mother ages, she can no longer care for herself and must be moved into an assisted-living facility where she remains as her health slowly declines until the end of the book.

Father

Alice's father aspired to be a poet. As such he was creative in his own way. Tragically and somewhat mysteriously, Father died when Alice was 5 years old. All that is known is that Father drove his car into the river and drowned. After Father's death, Mother has live-in boyfriends, but none of them is a particularly inspiring father figure for Alice. After



Mother is sent to the mental asylum, there are many men in Alice's life who play the fatherly role in Alice's life with varying degrees of success. However, there is never a single man who ever fills the role of Father in Alice's life.

Father is remembered fondly by both Alice and Mother, and he continues to influence both women well after his death. Since Father is the person who first introduced Alice and Mother to the idea of moving to Florida, he initiated the fantasies which provided these women with an imaginary escape from the harshness of their lives. When Alice develops as a young English student, she exhibits talent that her teacher Mr. Early recognizes, and it becomes apparent to both Alice and her teacher that she could become the poet that her Father wanted to be.

Arthur

Arthur is an employee of Uncle Billy and Aunt Frances. He is dependable and loyal. He has no family or friends and seems to lead a lonely life. When Alice goes to live with Uncle Billy and Aunt Frances, she spends a lot of time with Arthur because he is in charge of driving Alice. Because Alice spends so much time with Arthur, she befriends him. In his conversations with Alice, Arthur reminds her of some of her mother's virtues, especially during times when Alice vows never to become like her mother. Arthur reminds Alice of Mother's generosity citing how willingly and happily Mother gave Arthur her Magnavox because she was convinced that such a gift would bring joy to Arthur. In some ways, Arthur is more than just a friend to Alice because he also plays some of the fatherly roles in her life. For example, when Alice first starts driving, it is Arthur who takes her out in the car and supervises her. For Alice, Arthur is more than just a household servant, and it is clear that Alice does consider him a family member. Indeed, after Arthur dies, Alice is scandalized that Uncle Billy and Aunt Frances do not consider burying him in the family plot.

Uncle Billy

Uncle Billy is Mother's brother. He and his wife, Aunt Frances, gain custody of Alice when Mother is sent to the "San." Uncle Billy is a wealthy businessman. He owns a house on a lake and keeps servants including Arthur. He also keeps a home in Tucson, Arizona where he and his family vacation every spring. Uncle Billy is a stable provider in young Alice's life, but his role in her upbringing is somewhat limited. He does not seem to take an active role in educating or disciplining Alice while she is staying with him. He does however promise her treats and souvenirs from his many business trips if she promises to behave herself.

Despite his wealth, Uncle Billy seems to be a greedy man. While Alice is staying with Nonna, she notices that Uncle Billy lays claim on many of the family treasures that are housed in Nonna's home. Uncle Billy goes as far as writing his name on some the back of some valuable paintings in Nonna's home so that he can take them when Nonna dies. Moreover, when Uncle Billy discovers that Nonna has given Alice some jewelry



that he thinks ought to be given to Aunt Frances, he becomes extremely angry with Nonna.

Aunt Frances

Aunt Frances is Uncle Billy's wife, and hence, Mother's sister-in-law. Aunt Frances manages the household. Aunt Frances is a stickler for rules and manners. After gaining custody of Alice, she takes it upon herself to mold young Alice. She dictates how Alice wears her hair and what clothes Alice wears. Despite Aunt Frances's active role in Alice's upbringing, Alice doesn't ever consider Aunt Frances a mother or parent. Rather, Alice's relationship to Aunt Frances is more like that between a guest and her hostess.

Like her husband, Aunt Frances is preoccupied with material goods. Aunt Frances often talks about how important it is for her to manage the household economies. Her attachment to her possessions is also the only reason why she shows any concern for the happiness of her servants. She thinks that it is important to keep her help happy, not because it would be good in itself for her employees to be content, but because this would effectively prevent them from stealing her property.

Nonna

Nonna is Uncle Billy and Mother's mother, and she is Alice's grandmother. Alice goes to live with Nonna when she is 13 years old. Nonna is wealthy and lives in the "Big House" with all of the family treasures that Uncle Billy and Aunt Frances covet. She has suffered a stroke and cannot speak or care for herself. As such, she needs the help of her nurse Miss O'Boyle. Moreover, because of her condition, Nonna cannot regulate the teen-aged Alice's activities, and Alice enjoys a great deal of freedom while living with Nonna. Although Nonna cannot verbally communicate with Alice, Alice often "converses" with Nonna by watching Nonna's gestures and body language.

Nonna's relationship with Mother is strained at best. We discover that Nonna never wanted a second child after Billy was born, and she especially didn't want a daughter. When Mother was growing up under Nonna's care, Nonna had a hard time relating to the boisterous and creative child. Mother's imagination soon became a source of pain for Nonna because, according to Nonna, Mother fabricated hurtful stories including stories about Nonna's husband's infidelities.



Objects/Places

Florida

Florida is an imaginary place first introduced by Father. He describes it as a lush utopia where it is always warm and where sweet, ripe fruits are found in great abundance. After Father's death, Florida becomes an imaginary place of refuge for Mother and Alice. When Mother is sent to the "San," Alice sometimes describes Mother's stay there as "Mother's Florida." Here, Florida takes on a slightly different meaning because it is not utopia at the "San." Insofar as the "San" is a place of refuge from the harshness of reality, there is a minimal sense in which the 'San' serves as Mother's "Florida."

The San

The "San" is the mental asylum to which Mother is sent when Alice is 10 years old.

Tucson

Uncle Billy and Aunt Frances keep a vacation home in Tucson, Arizona. While Alice lives with Uncle Billy and Aunt Frances, she takes annual trips to Tucson.

The Big House

The "Big House" is Nonna's house where she lives with her nurse Miss O'Boyle. Within the "Big House" are many family treasures to which family members (particularly Uncle Billy and Aunt Frances) lay claim.



Themes

Florida and the Happy Life

When he was still alive, Alice's father used to talk to Alice and Mother about moving to Florida. Florida, as described by Father, is a sunny, warm place with an abundance of sweet fruits. Before Father is able to take his family to Florida, he dies mysteriously.

After Father's death, Alice and Mother still imagine a life in Florida, but over time, Florida becomes increasingly a fictional place. Florida is more of a utopia to which Alice and Mother can escape from their difficult life. Florida is a place where both solace and happiness is found.

Identity

Alice shares a name with her mother. After her mother is sent to the mental asylum, Alice is left to live with various relatives including her Uncle Billy and Aunt Frances and her Nonna. As Alice drifts from one household to the next, Alice grows and develops as a child and adolescent. During these formative years, Alice's identity is shaped by the people who care for her, but Alice is always haunted by her namesake with whom she has an ambivalent relationship at best. At times, Alice admits that she misses her mother dearly, but at other times, Alice vows that she will never become like her mother.

Ultimately, when Alice becomes a grown woman living in New York, she is able to find herself. Although her relationships with some men remind her of some of her mother's relationships with men, she has not become the unstable and reckless woman that her mother was. She has a good job teaching English. She is committed to her students and derives personal satisfaction from inspiring her students to engage with literature.

Loss

When she is 5 years old, Alice loses her father who mysteriously drowns. When she is 10 years old, Alice is separated from her mother who is sent to a mental asylum. At such a young age, loss of her parents is difficult for Alice. Young Alice clings to the memory of her father, and although she often expresses ambivalent feelings towards her mother as a caregiver, she admits that misses her mother dearly. Thus, Alice's losses as a child seem to bring out her dependence and neediness.

After she has grown into a young woman, Alice also loses various people who played motherly or fatherly roles during her childhood. Alice's grandmother "Nonna" dies. Arthur and Mr. Early also die. Although the adult Alice is able to respect the memory of her grandmother, Arthur, and Mr. Early, she does not cling to those memories. Indeed, the



memories of these people cause Alice to evaluate how far she has come and how far she can go as a person. After Nonna's death, Alice uses her inheritance to begin her new life in New York. After Arthur and Mr. Early's deaths, Alice often reflects about how she has managed to survive a highly mobile life and how she has become a strong young woman. She often wishes that Arthur and Mr. Early could see and visit her because she suspects that they would be proud of her. Thus, unlike her losses as a child, Alice's losses as an adult serve to remind her of her independence and personal strength.

Style

Point of View

Schutt's *Florida* is told in the first-person from Alice's point of view. The first three parts of the book are written in past tense suggesting that the adult Alice is reporting events from her past that she remembers. In Part 4, Alice switches from section to section from past tense to present tense suggesting that Alice is describing some episodes from her memory and other events from her present life.

Although the Alice's story is told from the grown woman's perspective, the adult Alice seems sensitive to the way in which her younger self interpreted past events as they occurred and how her younger self responded emotionally to these events. There is evidence that the adult Alice is capable of recalling the younger Alice's experiences because in her narration of her childhood, she describes her younger self's anxieties about her loss of Father and her separation from Mother.

Setting

Although not explicitly mentioned, much of Alice's childhood occurs in Minnesota. The only reference to the state in which the story is set is on page 19 where Alice refers to the state as the "land-of-lakes" state. However, Alice lives and visits many places over the course of the book.

After Mother is sent to the "San," Alice lives with her Uncle Billy. Uncle Billy's house is located near a lake. Alice lives with Uncle Billy until she is 13 years old. During this time, Alice takes annual trips with Uncle Billy and Aunt Frances to their vacation home in Arizona.

When Alice is 13 years old, she moves to live with Nonna in the "Big House" on the other side of the lake, and she stays there until she moves away at an unspecified age.

Ultimately, the adult Alice ends up in New York where she teaches English. She visits Mother in California every summer until Mother is sent to a nursing home.

Language and Meaning

Schutt's use of language is best described as economical. *Florida* is a short book even though it spans the life of a young woman. The chapters are all very brief and are



written in poetic prose. The language is simple and uncomplicated. Schutt does not attempt to encumber her story with lengthy explanations or descriptions of what is happening to her characters, but rather, the reader is left to speculate about the missing details. This encourages the reader to actively contemplate what is written.

Structure

Florida has four parts. In Part 1, Alice's separation from Mother is presented, and we learn about Alice's life with Uncle Billy and Aunt Frances with whom she lives between the ages of 10 and 13. In Part 2, Alice's life with Nonna in the "Big House" is discussed. During her stay with Nonna, Alice is between the ages of 13 and 15. In Part 3, Alice is grown up, and she lives independently in New York where she also teaches. In Part 4, Alice is a young woman, and she suffers more losses of people who are dear to her. Arthur dies, and Mother is moved to a nursing home where she is dying.

Although each part is organized approximately chronologically, the short sections that appear within the parts are not presented linearly. Although the reader is aware that some time has passed from section to section, it is often unclear just how much time has passed. Moreover, the episodes are not presented in a linear fashion. This way of presenting the events in Alice's life mimics the way one might remember one's childhood. That is, one has the impression that some time has passed between one memory and another, but one usually doesn't have a firm grip on exactly how much time has passed. At best, one can estimate that two episodes from one's childhood happened within the same year or within a span of a few months, but one is usually hard-pressed to report one's memories with greater precision.



Quotes

"But my father was dead and my name was hers and everyone said I was surely her daughter, so why did she leave me except that she did?" Part 1, pg. 11

"Arthur said to me, 'No one could be happy the way she was.' He said, 'No one in the family was as generous...remember that,' but I forgot." Part 1, pg. 19

"I did not become what I had hoped I might become...I stayed a shapeless, wicked girl, clumsy, shy, easily embarrassed." Part 1, pg. 25

"Florida, where was it, I wondered, but nobody knew." Part 1, pg. 30

"Mother took her old name back, making me one of them - Uncle Billy, Aunt Frances, we had the same last name: *Fivey*. I was my mother all over again. *Alice Fivey*." Part 1, pg. 44

" 'It is possible your mother might come home,' Uncle Billy had told me long ago, and I had felt afraid of what might happen if she did, and then she didn't come home, yet I was still afraid, often lonely - surely thirsty. No one was ever as happy or as sad as she was, my mother, who might have come home to claim me, but she didn't." Part 2, pg. 77

"Once I told Mr. Early that my father had wanted to be a poet, and Mr. Early said, 'That's where you get it from. All the more reason you should,' he said, by which he meant I had to do for my father what he could not now do for himself." Part 2, pg. 79

"I though, I deserve a Walter, and he must have thought he deserved me, or else why did we stay together, a year, another year until he died?" Part 3, pg. 104

"In the end, I was glad that she lost out to Uncle Billy and Aunt Frances; in the end, I was glad to live away from her. *I did not want to be different*." Part 3, pg. 110

" 'I can live anywhere easily - Have done.' My boast, but I believe it. I am resilient." Part 4, pg. 140

"I am happy, happier. The newness of books for the young I teach, the way they read them as if no one before had ever rightly read them or understood them, the press and the pressure of loving books, a book, a book of poems, a poem and the poet who wrote it, and then the sorrow to discover that the poet is dead!" Part 4, pg.152-153

" 'Alice,' she speaks, and she looks at me, and it has been a long time since Mother has used my name, which is also her name, as a good-bye, and I think she knows, as once she knew, what will happen to us." Part 4, pg. 156



Topics for Discussion

Mother is described as being the happiest and also being the saddest person in the lives of the characters in *Florida*. Mother's sadness originates from her actual life, but her happiness seems to be the product of her fantasies about "her" Florida. Is happiness that results from unreal daydreams or personal fictions just as good as happiness that is derived from actual events in a person's life?

Throughout the book, we witness Alice grow from being a naive child to a mature woman. Who are the people who most influence Alice's development as a person? What kind of influence does each person exert on Alice? To what extent do you think Alice shaped herself?

Do you think that Alice has managed to escape becoming like her mother?

Are the losses that Alice has had to endure best described as setbacks or opportunities for growth?

What role do books and literature play in Alice's development as a person?

Alice's life is presented as brief episodes without clear indications of the specific times at which the episodes occurred. How does this way of presenting Alice's story affect the narrative?

Florida ends with a good-bye exchanged between Alice and her elderly mother. Does this ending leave you with a sense of satisfaction and closure? If so, why? If not, is this a defect in the story?