Friedman's Fables Study Guide

Friedman's Fables by Edwin Friedman

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Plot Summary

This collection of contemporary fables builds upon the long history and traditions of other such narratives including those written and presented by the legendary Aesop as it explores and comments upon various aspects of human behavior. As each fable dramatizes important moral questions as fables are generally intended to do, the collection as a whole explores issues related to the importance of self-responsibility, individuality, and identity.

The collection begins with a Prologue written by the author, in which he discusses the process by which the Fables came to be collected and published. He suggests that that process was made complicated by the input of several individuals who felt they had a responsibility to influence the content of the stories which, as the author claims, led to difficulties with the characters themselves who, he further claims, were far more influential in the creation of the fables than he was himself. He concludes the Prologue with the assertion that one of his primary intents in creating the Fables was exploring the nature of good communication, in terms of both the content of the stories and the way in which they were told.

The fables themselves are collected under four headings, each of which is introduced with a brief commentary from the author that highlights one of his concerns about communication. The first part of the collection is sub-titled "The Failure of Syntax", and begins with commentary by the author suggesting that good communication is less an intellectual process than an emotional one. The six stories gathered under that heading each explore situations in which poor communication results in misunderstanding. The second part of the collection is headed "The Demons of Resistance", and begins with the author commenting on the various aspects of an individual's psyche that prevent that individual from realizing effective communication. Five of the six stories here dramatize ways in which individuals don't pay attention to efforts being made to communicate with them. The sixth, "The Curse", dramatizes a conversation between The Creator and Satan in which the latter develops a means by which effective communication can be short circuited.

The narrative then interjects an interlude, in which three famous literary characters, Faust, Oedipus, and Cassandra debate the relationship between knowledge and resistance to good, effective, emotion-based communication.

The third sub-group of fables is collected under the heading of "Bonds and Binds," with the author suggesting in his introduction that the more open-minded someone is, the more likely it is that their relationships with other individuals and with the world will be relatively flexible and enriching. The six stories here are anchored in experiences of individual struggle against the domination, either actual or perceived, of others. Finally, there is the sub-section entitled "Reptilian Regressions," with the author leading off with a discussion of how important it is to not take life and/or communication without a sense of humor, the six stories under this heading all dramatizing situations in which

circumstances and events, the give and take and lessons of life, are all taken too seriously.

The collection concludes with an epilogue in which the characters complain to each other about how they've been manipulated and mishandled by the author. The characters also find echoes of their own experiences in the stories of the others. Finally, the author has a brief dialogue with Satan, arguing the point that the meaning of the stories is not to be found in either the events or the characters but in the reader's interpretations.

Prologue, The Failure of Syntax, Fables 1 - 2

Prologue, The Failure of Syntax, Fables 1 - 2 Summary

This collection of contemporary fables builds upon the long history and traditions of other such narratives as it explores and comments upon various aspects of human behavior. As each fable dramatizes important moral questions the collection as a whole explores issues related to the importance of self-responsibility, and of individuality and identity.

In the Prologue, the author introduces the collection by commenting on how challenged he felt by the frequent, and varied, attempts by editors and publishers to revise his fables, and how he realized his feelings arose from a strong sense of protectiveness towards his characters. He describes the process by which the characters and their fables became known to him, his insight into why the fables are important (see "Quotes", p. 2-3), and the "illusions aim to shatter.

In "The Failure of Syntax," the author comments that effective communication does not depend upon grammar, structure, or word usage to succeed, but rather "on the emotional context in which the message is being heard." Attitudes, he writes, "are the real figures of speech."

In "The Bridge," man realizes that he must act immediately or lose a long awaited opportunity that he believes will define his life. As he sets off to take advantage of that opportunity, he crosses a bridge. There he encounters a second man, similarly dressed but with a rope tied around his waist. The second man asks the first man to hold the other end of the rope and then, before the first man can protest, jumps off the bridge. Before he reaches the bottom, however, the rope reaches its full length, and the second man tells the first man that he now has responsibility for the second man's life. After attempting to pull the second man back up and after trying to get him to help himself, the first man finds himself in a painful dilemma. The first man then has an idea, and tells the second man that he (the first man) "will not accept the position of choice for your life, only for my own", adding that the choice of how the situation will end is up to him. The second man cries out that the first man is being selfish and neither helps himself nor eases the first man's burden. The first man says he accepts the second man's choice and releases of the rope.

In "A Nervous Condition," John grows up with his nerve endings outside on his skin rather than inside his body. As a result, everyone treats him with oversensitivity to his feelings, giving him a very easy ride through family, school, and work. A woman, herself oversensitive, becomes involved with him and eventually marries him, treating him with the extreme care he has come to expect. Eventually, however, she becomes tired of doing so and herself becomes ill. One day she observes a mother cat nursing her

kittens and treating a lame one with apparent disregard, challenging it to strengthen itself. The woman then goes home and treats John the same way, blocking his path and deliberately stepping on his external nerves. When John reacts with shock, having spent his life assuming that everyone will respect his condition, his wife chases him around the house, continuing to step on his nerves. That night, they both fall into bed, exhausted. The next morning, the wife wakes up to discover that John's nerves have retreated into his body.

Prologue, The Failure of Syntax, Fables 1 - 2 Analysis

In the Prologue, the author establishes a clear relationship between his intention and the manifestations of that intention. There is a very strong sense here that those stories are very personal to him, that he feels a very powerful connection to the characters and their situations, as well as to the moral implications of both. There is also a very clear sense, carried through into the introduction to "The Failure of Syntax," that in examining/recounting the characters and their stories, he is particularly interested in issues related to communication. It's interesting to note, however, that he makes no mention of the immediately apparent central theme of the collection such as the the issue, nature, and implications of personal responsibility.

The action, characters and lessons of both "The Bridge" and "A Nervous Condition" are defined by questions of responsibility and specifically, who is responsible for whom and why. The Man on the Rope and John both deliberately place responsibility for their well being on others, a situation which the author, through the actions of the Man on the Bridge and of John's wife, clearly suggests is inappropriate. This particular suggestion is reiterated, albeit in various ways, in many of the fables that follow. Meanwhile, the outcomes of the two stories examine the point from a different respective. Both the Man on the Bridge and John's wife come to a point of deciding they are no longer prepared to accept the responsibility placed upon them, and take action to claim their own identity. Again, this point is reiterated throughout the collection.

All that said, both fables raise interesting questions about the rights of an individual placed in a position of responsibility for another. "The Bridge" makes it clear that the Man with the Rope has no good reason to place responsibility on the other man, but it could be argued that John in "A Nervous Condition," with his external nerve endings, is somewhat disabled and, at first glance, appears to need the consideration and help of others that he comes to expect. Is there a qualitative difference between these two sets of expectations? What do the actions of John's wife and the story's apparent thematic statement about responsibility seem to say about the relationship between the disabled and the able?

Finally, for consideration of how the author's stated intention to explore issues of communication manifests in "A Nervous Condition."

Part 1, The Failure of Syntax, Fables 3 - 6

Part 1, The Failure of Syntax, Fables 3 - 6 Summary

In "The Friendly Forest," a playful lamb worries about the arrival of a tiger in the forest where she makes her home, but is assured by her friends that she has nothing to worry about. When she tells them the tiger is making aggressive moves towards her and she is feeling more and more unsafe, they tell her that the tiger is just being the way tigers are, and that she should become more tolerant. As the lamb becomes more and more obsessed with the tiger, her friends become more and more impatient with her, eventually telling her she should communicate more with the tiger and come to some sort of compromise. As she is coming to realize that compromise feels wrong, a member of the forest community comments that "if you want a lamb and a tiger to live in the same forest, you don't try to make them communicate. You cage the bloody tiger."

In "Round in Circles," a moth, bewildered by the obsessive efforts of a darting fly to get through a window, tries to get it to see things in a different way, to try different ways of getting out. The fly, however, refuses, saying he doesn't have time to try different things. "I only have today," he says. In the gathering darkness, the moth tries to tell the fly to get some perspective or some distance, to see the situation from a different angle, but the fly is unable to. Suddenly the moth is distracted by a bright spark of light and then, as moths do, flies into the light and is burned "to a crisp on an electric arc."

In "Projection," the parents of little Billy become increasingly worried as, over the years, their son's drawings seem to become increasingly violent. Eventually, when the drawings start to include spilled internal organs and Billy starts cutting up his toys, the now frantic parents take him to a doctor. After watching Billy tear apart some toys and draw some very violent pictures, the doctor tells him that his parents are afraid he's very angry. Billy tells him the only thing that would make him angry is if his parents don't let him be what he wants to be when he grows up a doctor.

"Raising Cain: A Case History of the First Family" is written in the style of a report prepared by a social worker, analyzing the interpersonal dynamics and relationships within the "first family" of Adam, Eve, Cain, and Abel. The report examines the family's current situation, filled with tension between the two brothers and between the parents, each of whom, according to the report, blames the other for their discontent. The report expresses concern that if the parents don't rehabilitate their attitudes, their sons will themselves avoid taking responsibility for their own lives. A result, the report concludes, might be that Cain will take out his resentment for his lack of success on his younger brother and kill him.

Part 1, The Failure of Syntax, Fables 3 - 6 Analysis

In terms of the collection's thematic focus on communication, all four of these stories dramatize circumstances in which communication essentially fails. In both "The Friendly Forest" and "Round in Circles", communication is essentially impossible because the characters in the central relationships are locked into preconceptions, attitudes and ways of being that prevent them from effectively communicating. In other words, each of the characters is locked into his or her own identities which prevent him or her from expanding his or her perspective. This, in turn, is the flip side, the darker side, of the collection's secondary thematic consideration of the value and nature of individual identity, a circumstance that seems to be affecting all the central characters in this section's fables.

Meanwhile, communication completely fails in "Projection" because Billy's parents are too busy projecting their ideas of their son onto him, and are therefore unable to both communicate their own feelings and understand his. Projection is also a concern of "Raising Cain," which uses characters from the Old Testament as the basis of a satirical commentary on both family relationships and the well-intentioned but ineffective social workers who see and analyze but can't/don't really affect those they're trying to help.

At the same time, this section's explorations of the collection's thematic interest in responsibility are, in general, colored by the additional factor of fear. The Lamb's actions are defined by fear, a manifestation of the potential spiritual corruption when someone takes too much, almost a paranoid, responsibility for oneself. The Moth tries to take too much responsibility for another, while the Fly takes limited responsibility for himself. The actions of Billy's parents are defined first by irresponsibility disguised mistaken for good parenting (i.e. they don't become appropriately involved in Billy's life in the name of giving him his independence). Ultimately, their actions, like those of the Lamb, become defined by fear, leading to a sense of responsibility based on assumption rather than on actual insight and/or perception.

Finally, "The Friendly Forest" is one of the fables in the collection in which setting plays a significant role in that the close, dark, and secretive atmosphere of the forest reinforces the near-paranoia that enters the lamb's mind following the appearance of the Tiger.

Part 2,

Part 2, Summary

In an introduction to the next six fables, the author comments that "the essential difficulty in trying to communicate with another is how to get past the interference of the resistance demons who inhabit that other". He suggests that the best way to do that is not confront those demons head on, but allow room for the hearer's imagination and experience to overcome them.

"The Power of Belief," a living man proclaims he is dead. In spite of the best efforts of his family, friends and community to convince him otherwise, he maintains his belief that he is, in fact, dead. He is taken to a psychiatrist and a minister, both of whom leave their conversations with the man frustrated by his unshakeable belief. Finally, his family doctor asks him whether dead men bleed. When the man says no, the doctor asks if he will agree to let himself be cut. The wound, the doctor says, will be immediately treated. The man agrees, and both the doctor and the community rejoice when they see the man bleeding. The man, however, comments that he made a mistake. "Dead men," he proclaims, "do bleed."

In "An American Holly," a man lavishes loving care on a holly plant which, in the location where he first plants it, thrives and grows. When he realizes it seems to need more room, the man puts it in a place with more space. In spite of all his care and attention, however, the holly wilts and withers. In the spring following a particularly difficult winter, the man cuts it back one more time, at first with care and then with increasing angry frustration, until all that's left is a thin stick. He then goes away with his family, telling them that when he returns he'll dig it up. But when he gets back, he discovers that the holly is once again thriving.

In "Soaring," Mr. and Mrs. Bird, looking forward to retirement after raising nine children and seeing them successfully learn to fly, worry that their last child, Baby Bird, seems unable or unwilling to fly on his own. Their repeated attempts to get him to fly, the same lessons they taught their other children, end in failure. They do not know, however, that with every lesson, Baby Bird refuses to give them the satisfaction of seeing him achieve. The parents become increasingly worried about him, taking their frustrations and fears out on themselves and each other. Meanwhile, Baby Bird becomes increasingly resentful. One morning, however, he wakes up and realizes his parents are gone. He decides to punish them for their inattentive absence by jumping out of the next, not flying, and injuring himself. Halfway to the ground, however, instinct kicks in and he begins flying naturally, soaring to the sky. He fleetingly remembers his nest but is enjoying his new freedom too much to return home.

Part 2, Analysis

In terms of the communication-related points made in the introduction to this section, each of these fables focuses on the nature and ramifications of resistance to effective communication. There is the resistance of the Dead Man and his community to each other, the holly grower's resistance to the truth of the plant and the holly's resistance to the grower's excessive control, and Baby Bird's resistance to the will and ways of his parents. All of these, it seems, can be seen as manifestations of the collection's thematic interest in the nature of individual identity. In other words, the resistance of the characters seems tied to a desire to maintain a powerful, sustaining self image. This point, by the way, could also be said of Mr. and Mrs. Bird, who do not necessarily resist the communicative efforts of Baby Bird but whose strong self-image as good parents proves to be a source of conflict. Their actions and attitudes make the thematically relevant statement that too strong and too inflexible a sense of self-identity can lead to tension. At the same time, however, it's interesting to note that each fable also generates the very strong sense that those who resist that control are in fact heroic, in their resistance and their resulting steadfast sense of self-identity. It seems that the collection's thematic stance on the nature and value of individuality has, in this section at least, a strong sense of ambivalence.

The theme of responsibility, meanwhile, is explored through the experiences of characters who take on too much responsibility for others. The community of the "Dead Man" strives to take responsibility for his identity and well being, Mr. and Mrs. Bird attempt to control the life of their youngest child who, in turn, attempts to control his own life. The Holly Grower strives desperately to control the life and growth of his holly plant. Again, those who struggle against that control are portrayed as heroic, a potential explanation for why the holly, for example, is the only "character" in the fables specifically defined as "American."

Part 2,

Part 2, Summary

In "Net Results," Harry obsessively tries to get his wife to play tennis with him, getting her lessons with the best professionals, buying her the best clothes and equipment, taking her to the best courts, and giving her everything she wants. Her game never improves. One day, as she tries to get him to think instead about their home life, he hits the ball straight up instead of directly across the net, runs around to his wife's side of the court, hits the ball before it comes down, again straight up, and continues to rush back and forth from side to side.

In "Metamorphosis," one morning, Mrs. K discovers that her husband has become a caterpillar. In the days and weeks that follow, she tries everything she can to get him to pay attention to her, but he seems determined to ignore her. She eventually fits out a shoebox with some branches and leaves for him, and discovers that when she is out of the room for extended periods of time, she always comes back to find him in a different place in the box. When she receives an offer to visit a friend for a few days, she worries about what will happen to him if she's gone for such a long time, but eventually decides to go. While she's gone, she doesn't think of her husband at all, and when she returns, it's a few days before she remembers him. When she does, and when she goes looking in his box, she is shocked to discover that he is gone. As she's worrying about what happened to him, he comes in to find her, back in his human form. As they embrace in a more affectionate way than they had in years, he wonders aloud where she was, saying that he was afraid he'd lost her.

In "The Curse," The Holy One asks Satan to come up with a curse to punish humanity for being disobedient. Satan meets with his committee, and comes up with the perfect curse, a way to turn the bonds of feeling into bindings. "It will all be done unwittingly," Satan goes on to say, "in a fog that resembles love but that will come to be called romance ... their intelligence will fake them out...until they are unable to distinguish intimacy from dependency." The Creator points out that some people will manage to transcend the curse, teach their children to do the same, and thereafter trigger a new kind of evolutionary process. Satan returns to his committee, and after six days returns with a solution that the human mind and intellect will be turned against itself, "denying life's biological origins, the secret connection that unifies creation". It will, in other words, define self and relationships by thought rather than by nature. It will be called, Satan suggests, "psychotherapy."

Part 2, Analysis

This section's consideration of resistance to effective communication manifests in all three stories. Harry resists his wife's efforts to communicate her feelings because of his obsessive determination to make her into what he wants her to be. It could also be

argued that Harry's wife resists his efforts to communicate his affection and love for her - although the fable never makes this explicit point, there is the strong sense that Harry is doing the right thing wanting his wife to be a better person for the wrong reasons and in the wrong way. Meanwhile, the relationship between Mrs. K and the transformed Mr. K metaphorically dramatizes the difficulties that arise when two people, attempting to communicate with one another, essentially occupy two different worlds and identities. Again, a strong sense of individuality and self, held to be a positive value in so many of the other fables, is here portrayed as a negative, specifically when manifesting as an attempt to force another to conform to expectations.

Control is also the issue of note in relation to the collection's thematic consideration of responsibility - specifically, control as over-responsibility. Harry strives desperately to control his wife. Mr. and Mrs. K. seem to have lost connection with each other, with both of them striving to control the attention of the other. In both these cases, control can be defined as "taking responsibility for the behavior of".

In "The Curse", meanwhile, resistive communication is the topic of discussion for Satan and the Creator, making the satirical suggestion that lack of communication is either the result of individual human self-centeredness, the punishment of the Infinite or both. Thematic examinations of identity and responsibility are also present here, with the narrative making similarly pointed points about the dangers posed by a self-centered sense of identity and, ironically enough, about human beings handing over responsibility for good/bad communication to that Infinite. In other words, by writing the fable as a dialogue between the Creator and Satan, the author is suggesting that human beings have abdicated self-responsibility.

Other interesting points about this fable include the intriguing non-traditional take on the relationship between the Creator and Satan as allies, both essentially interested in challenging humanity to be the best it can be. There is also the satiric portrayal of contemporary bureaucracy and decision making processes and Satan's reference to/definition of psychotherapy. This, in turn, is interesting for a couple of reasons. First, the author is himself a psychotherapist, which means that he is poking fun at himself and at the profession in which he works. Second, and more thematically relevant, psychotherapy here comes across as another way in which humanity avoids taking responsibility for itself. The implication of Satan's definition of psychotherapy implies that instead of acting on individual identity as defined by the Creator, psychotherapy will send individuals into the realm of thinking about identity and therefore avoiding active personal responsibility.

Interlude

Interlude Summary

Two famous characters from literature debate the best way for humanity to realize truths about itself, and for humans to realize truths about THEM-selves. Faust (a medieval scholar who sold his soul to the devil in exchange for more knowledge) argues that external, objective knowledge is the best and most effective way to realizing truth. Oedipus argues that searching and understanding within the self is the way to truth. As part of his argument, Faust comments that "the essential question of human existence is not how your family did you in; it's maintaining your integrity." In other words, look to the future for inspiration, not to the past for blame. For his part, Oedipus argues that external knowledge has buried essential understanding and/or acceptance of nature beneath jargon.

Their argument is interrupted by the arrival of another literary figure, Cassandra, the Trojan princess blessed by Apollo with the gift of prophecy and cursed by him to never be believed. She argues that both Faust and Oedipus are wrong, and that they both are essentially arguing the value of the same thing of certainty over ambiguity. She goes on to suggest that uncertainty, not knowing truth, are fundamental aspects of human existence, and that trying to connect with certainty from either source is in fact, a denial of essential personal responsibility, the individual's responsibility for himself, his identity, his actions and his future. She argues that the salvation of the human race as a whole and human identity in individuals depends upon clarity, rather than upon certainty, and advocates the asking of questions rather than the seeking of answers.

Cassandra's comments and insights lead Oedipus to comment that to enact ways of living based on her perspective would mean changing myth, in both its facts and its function. Cassandra agrees, and then Oedipus runs off, commenting that he needs to call his mother.

Interlude Analysis

The first point to note about the Interlude is the identity of the characters, each of whom is the central figure in what has become an archetypal narrative dramatizing thematic considerations of identity and responsibility. Faust sells his soul to the devil in return for more knowledge, a story that metaphorically comments on the fatal dangers of too much ambition), defining his identity in terms of the amount of knowledge he has and giving up responsibility for his own well being in the process. Oedipus unintentionally fulfills a prophecy made about him in his youth that he will kill his father and marry his mother. In its metaphoric commentary on the futility of attempting to escape fate, the story makes the point that identity is not chosen by the individual but by the gods, and that the individual has the responsibility to accept that will and the further responsibility to accept its consequences. Cassandra is the Trojan princess given the gift of prophecy

by the god Apollo but who, after refusing his sexual advances, was cursed to never be believed. Her story symbolically comments on the futility of attempting to relate more to the future than to the present, of attempting to take more responsibility than one should or is even possible, and of attempting to define one's identity by what might be rather than by what is.

Part 3, Bonds and Binds, Fables 1 - 3

Part 3, Bonds and Binds, Fables 1 - 3 Summary

The introduction to this section of the book suggests that the more black and white and/or absolute people see life's issues and uncertainties as being, the more likely their connections will become chains, whereas those who embrace life's ambiguities will be more flexible in their relationships and in their ways of thinking.

"Symbiosis" In the first section of this fable, written in prose like a novel, A Bacterium tells the Virus inhabiting to leave. The Virus argues that neither can exist without the other, but the Bacterium insists that it needs to reclaim its identity. In the second section, written in dialogue like a play with the characters identified only by their initials, the Bacterium asserts its right to be free of the Virus' control, while the Virus suggests the Bacterium hasn't changed nearly as much as it thinks it has. In the third section, there are no indications of which "character" is speaking at which time, but the content of the argument clearly suggests the Bacterium is telling the Virus that it was becoming malignant, while the Virus argues that the Bacterium misunderstands what it means to be compatible. The Bacterium closes the argument with the suggestion that if the two actually separate, "something might evolve."

"Attachment" A man washed overboard by a shipwreck finds himself on a tropical island with a tribe of people who attach themselves to one another by their umbilical cords, which remain intact after birth. As narration contemplates the benefits of this arrangement, it also describes how the shipwrecked man became increasingly uncomfortable in that environment and even tried to become married to one of the tribe's women, but found himself unable to feel comfortable with both the individual and tribal intimacy. The man is eventually rescued and returned to "civilization", where his repeated efforts to publish his story end in almost universal rejection. He is eventually published as a work of fantasy. Several years later, a ship discovers the same island. Its crew is investigated by police/the military, and the people of the island are up-to-date with the events of the world. One of the crew members recalls the shipwrecked man's story, and one of the islanders says he remembers the shipwrecked man, adding that after he left, everyone cut off their umbilical cords.

"Jean and Jane" Jean and Jane are two friends, quite similar in many ways, including physicality and age but quite different in others. Jean is quieter, more independent, and more thoughtful while Jane is more outgoing, always with other people, and seems generally happier. As they mature, Jean wonders why Jane seems to have so much more going for her, and eventually starts seeing a therapist to help her figure it out. One day, she is surprised to see Jane coming out of the therapist's office. Conversation between the two women reveals that Jane has been seeing the same therapist for years, that she envies Jean her ability to be independent and to handle solitude, and that she is seeking help for her inability to say no.

Part 3, Bonds and Binds, Fables 1 - 3 Analysis

The "bonds and binds" referred to in the introduction to this section can be seen as referring to not only the binds of relationship, but also those of belief. The fables here suggest that that beliefs about relationship and identity can be as defining and/or as restricting as actual ties of physicality, "Attachment," feeling in "Jean and Jane," or necessity, "Symbiosis." This, in turn, can be seen as defining this section's thematic consideration of identity. Binding and rigid beliefs about self in relationship to others prove restrictive to individual identity such as in "Jean and Jane" and confusing when it comes to the boundaries of identity between two individuals in "Symbiosis"). Finally, the "bonds and binds" of belief can be seen as manifestations of the collection's thematic contemplation of responsibility, in that "binds" can restrict an individual from taking responsibility for him/herself in both "Jean and Jane" and "Symbiosis." "Bonds," as represented by the original condition of the islanders in "Attachment", are portrayed as nurturing, affirming, and ultimately culturally positive, in that they support individuals take responsibility for themselves at the same time as they reinforce the strengths of the community.

Meanwhile, "Attachment" considers all these issues from a more ambivalent perspective. There is the sense that while the narrative is suggesting that the bonds between individuals can lead to a strong feeling of harmony and unity, it is simultaneously suggesting that such closeness seems restrictive to those with clear, accustomed individual identity. At this point, it's interesting to consider what, exactly, the commentators on the Shipwrecked Man's story consider to be a "fantasy" or the physical connection of the islanders or the fact that that connection leads to contentment and peace? In any case, the story's ambivalence on the subject of the relationship between bonds/binds and individuality is reinforced by the fable's ending, which takes no clear, specific position on whether the islanders' decision to sever the umbilical cords is a good thing. In the context of the collection as a whole, which tends to celebrate individuality and identity, there is the sense that the separation is intended to be a good thing. At the same time, however, there is an inescapable sense of loss about the severing, a sense that something good, right, and affirming has been lost.

"Attachment" also contains one of the collection's few instances in which setting can be seen as playing an important role in the narrative. Specifically, the contrast between the desert island and "civilization" settings in "Attachment" can be seen as representing the tension between community and individuality.

Part 3, Bonds and Binds, Fables 4 - 6

Part 3, Bonds and Binds, Fables 4 - 6 Summary

In "The Magic Ring," an alluring and attractive woman is heartbroken when the man to whom she was happily married leaves her for another woman. When talking over the situation with her grandmother, she is surprised to learn that her grandmother has a magic ring, one that prevents the wearer from losing herself in love. When the woman protests that she wants to be able to love freely and fully, her grandmother tells her of the ring's second power. It can let the wearer know when a man is perfectly safe to love, thereby enabling the wearer to give free rein to her feelings. The grandmother also confesses that she had been given the ring by her grandmother. Narration describes how the woman got into and out of a number of relationships with different sorts of men, happiness and safety ensured by the ring. One day, however, as she is about to meet with a man identified by the ring as safe, she forgets to put the ring on, but resolves to be careful. As she meets the man, she notices that he's throwing something onto the pavement. When asked, the man says it was "just some stupid ring" given to him by his "saintly grandmother".

In "The Lesson," a woman is taken from her bed while sleeping, and is beaten by a male assailant who simultaneously berates her for not following the rules and comments that she is being taught a lesson. During the beating, the woman is held firmly by his two silent accomplices. After the woman falls unconscious, narration comments that "her husband" went back to bed, while her "parents" slipped back into their graves. Narration then comments that the woman had another dream. In words and phrases that duplicate those of the first dream, the woman is again taken from her bed. Instead of being held and beaten, however, the woman is again held but is this time kissed and caressed by the third figure. Narration comments that the woman is desperate to respond, but she is again held back by the two silent accomplices.

In "Cinderella: An Address Delivered to the National Association of Family Therapists by Cinderella's Stepmother," the stepmother begins by thanking her listeners for the opportunity to tell the story of Cinderella from her point of view. The Stepmother describes her loneliness after the death of her first husband, her surprise when she is courted by Cinderella's attractive father, her increased surprise when he proposes soon after their meeting, and her impulsive decision to accept. She goes on to comment on her belief in hard work and responsibility, how her two daughters shared that belief, and how Cindy didn't, always running to her father or aunt whenever she was asked to help around the house. She also describes how Cindy dreamed of being rescued, of how she taunted her two step-sisters with her belief, and how she became involved with a "charming prince" of a young man who seemed to be as much of a flaky dreamer as she was, but who actually turned out to be royalty. The stepmother describes how Cindy and the prince got married in an extravagant royal celebration, how Cindy completely separated herself from her family, and how she and her husband concocted the story of

the stepmother's meanness, perhaps because it was "the only way they could really live with one another happily ever after."

Part 3, Bonds and Binds, Fables 4 - 6 Analysis

The "bonds and binds" that restrict effective communication are again at the center of the three fables in this section and specifically, the bindings of fear, of expectation of others, and of preconception. Despite their different bindings, however, the struggle of each of the central characters in these fables is essentially towards the same goal to express her true feelings safely and freely. The woman in "The Magic Ring" wants to love, the woman in "The Lesson" struggles to both love and express her pain, and Cinderella's step-mother is desperate to express her feelings about the experience with her troublesome stepdaughter. These struggles, in turn, can be seen as related to the collection's thematic interest in individuality and identity, in that the feelings of all three of these characters are integrally connected to who and what they are as well as the collection's primary thematic concern with responsibility. Specifically, the woman with the ring uses a magic trick to avoid genuine responsibility, while the restrictions of others prevent the woman in "The Lesson" from acting on her sense of self-responsibility. Finally, the taking of responsibility for her identity such as the release of her feelings and the telling of her truth free the Stepmother from the imposed responsibility, similar to that placed upon the Man on the Bridge in "The Bridge," of living up to the preconceptions and/or expectations of others.

Thematic considerations aside, there are a couple of stylistic points to note about this section. "The Magic Ring" is the only story in which "magic" explicitly plays an active part. Although it could be argued that the situation in "Metamorphosis" is grounded in magic of some sort, and that both those stories, along with "Cinderella," "The Friendly Forest," and one or two others, blur the boundaries between "fable" and "fairy tale." Nevertheless, the point must be made that even with the interpolation of occasional fantasy elements, all the fables are still firmly grounded in their consideration of very human, very real, behaviors and experiences.

Finally, the point must be made that of all the fables in the collection, "The Lesson" is the most visceral, the creepiest, and the most emotionally intense. This is due in part to the actions described by the narrative but also to the way in which those actions are described. There is a starkness to the language here that at times becomes a highly effective powerful under-writing, an evocation of feeling rather than an explanation of situation such as the woman's terror, the "parents" relentlessness" that gives a power and depth to the fable's moral perspective that many of the fables, in their overall gentleness, do not quite achieve.

Part 4, Reptilian Regressions, Fables 1 - 3

Part 4, Reptilian Regressions, Fables 1 - 3 Summary

The author introduces this section by commenting on how reptiles and amphibians rarely exhibit mischievous, irreverent, playful, or nurturing behavior. "They are," he says, "deadly serious creatures." He then asks whether, in communicating in a non-nurturing, dishonest, too-serious way, a human being is experiencing "a reptilian regression."

In "Caught in Her Own Web," one August evening, as Mrs. Brown singlehandedly set her household straight," a spider named Ms. Mary Muffet completes work on a web. As she contemplates the finished work, she discovers that is perfectly balanced and symmetrical, a feat that, as narration comments, is rare to the point of uniqueness. She examines the web in detail, ensuring there are no flaws. When the web catches victim after victim, rather than have them remain trapped and disfigure the perfection of her work, Ms. Muffet winds them in webbing and drops them out of the web, immediately repairing the damage and restoring the web's symmetry. After working all night to preserve her work, Ms. Muffet dies from exhaustion and starvation. Mrs. Brown, meanwhile, whom narration now describes as extremely ill, crawled "painfully into the kitchen to make sure they loaded the dishwasher right."

In "The Wallflower," a beautiful, perfect flower stands in a field full of less perfect wildflowers, watching them all get picked and wondering why she was left. She begins to doubt her worth, but is relieved to finally be picked in the rush to gather flowers for the village fair. Once she is taken to a flower shop, however, the owner has her placed behind the other flowers so he can have her for himself. As the other flowers get taken away, the beautiful flower again worries that she is going to be left behind, and exerts herself to make herself more attractive. At the end of the day, however, she realizes she has over-exerted herself, and neither her shape nor her perfume is as pleasing as it was. Just when she is giving up hope, however, a young man rushes into the shop, finds her perfect, takes her home and presses her between the pages of a book.

"Panic" A long row of dominoes, each standing on its end and close to other dominoes, falls into a panic when one of them falls into another and starts a chain reaction in which all of them fall, or at least know they are about to fall. Several consider possible alternatives for halting the inevitable progression but most realize that falling is inevitable. At one point, however, one domino simply does not fall, triggering a chain reaction in which all the previously fallen dominoes end up standing back up. When the standing domino is asked how it managed to stay standing, it says it's not sure, but comments that "while each of you kept trying to hold your neighbor up, mu concern was that I did not go down."

Part 4, Reptilian Regressions, Fables 1 - 3 Analysis

The first point to note about this section is the relationship of the various stories to the author's commentary on "reptilian" experiences of life. Specifically, on how both Ms. Muffet and the beautiful flower both take themselves and their existence too seriously. This, in turn, relates to the collection's thematic interest in identity and in responsibility. Both Ms. Muffet and the flower have such an obsessive sense of their own identity that they take too much responsibility for preserving that identity and end up self destructing. The same can be said of Mrs. Brown, who undergoes approximately the same experience as Ms. Muffet, and the falling dominoes in "Panic". Their sense of identity is so obsessively defined by standing that they're unable to think of anything else, unlike the standing domino whose sense of identity is equally as strong but not to the point of obsessively blocking out other thoughts and perspectives. Here again, the collection's ambivalence on the subject of identity is clear. On the one hand, a strong self-image is celebrated such as the standing domino, but too strong a self-image of the flower is portrayed as dangerous.

Meanwhile, there is an interesting point to note here about setting, specifically that of "The Wallflower." When the action of that fable moves from country where the flower retains her beauty to city where the pressure to compete leads to her beauty being destroyed), the shift in setting suggests that the natural life is more conducive to sustaining identity than the more chaotic and intellectual life of the city. Here there are faint echoes of the conflict between Creator and Satan in "The Curse," in that the Creator tends to argue in favor of the so-called natural life and Satan acting in ways that, it seems, would ultimately remove human beings from that life.

Part 4, Reptilian Regressions, Fables 4 - 6

Part 4, Reptilian Regressions, Fables 4 - 6 Summary

In "Burnout," a scavenger fish who, had up to now been perfectly happy performing its duties in the bottom of the fish tank eating the shit of the other fish suddenly stops doing her job. She's not on strike, she's not angry, she just stops. As the result, the other fish in the tank almost immediately start behaving in ways opposite to their usual behavior. But when the scavenger fish is replaced with another that immediately does as the first used to (i.e. eating the shit of the first fish), the other fish in the tank return to their normal patterns of behavior. The first fish, meanwhile, is thrown out with the trash.

"Narcissus" In the middle of the 21st Century, scientists develop the capacity to create human life from scratch. After the technology is turned over to the United Nations, plans are put in motion to study how "ideal human life-forms" react to each other and their environment if isolated from other, "normal" human beings. This begins a lengthy process to determine exactly what "ideal" means. Eventually, however, all the various special interest groups come to an agreement - all, that is, except for educators, therapists and clergy who "did not see how any change in the human form could appreciably affect learning, human relationships, or emotional growth". Eventually, however, they come up with a final addition to the perfect human. A screen, placed in the forehead, that would provide readouts showing everything going on in the human brain. No one, as a result, would be able to lie. Overcoming resistance from politicians, the plan is set in motion, the perfect beings are created, and the first day everything functions according to plan. On the second day, however, everything stops. It seems that as they're getting ready to start their days, every one of the human beings looks at itself in its mirror, notices the screen, and becomes "so fascinated with what was in its head" that it stayed there, staring at itself, "and none of them ever functioned again."

In "Tradition," three important historical figures from the worlds of psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud, religion, Moses, and socio-political-economic philosophy, Karl Marx, debate what has become of the ideologies they founded. They each express concern with how their teachings have become misinterpreted, have had invalid limits imposed upon them, and are led by individuals more concerned with conserving the various ideologies and/or with making people feel good rather than allowing the ideologies to interact with reality. They argue about the limitations of each of their teachings, how none are judged by any "external criteria for truth" and how it's necessary for the masses to be taught some form of "salvation" in spite of the masses' ultimate resistance to change. Finally, Moses goes off to participate in the development of a document to be signed by all the world's religious leaders distancing themselves from their followers. As he goes, Moses comments that as the result of his conversation with Freud and Marx, he now believes non-religious leaders should be included as well. Marx and Freud both agree to sign.

Part 4, Reptilian Regressions, Fables 4 - 6 Analysis

In "Reptilian regressions" play a part in "Burnout,"in which the Scavenger Fish's withdrawal of services is met with the sort of panic typical in individuals and communities who take the status quo far too seriously and more indirectly in "Tradition." In that fable, the situations discussed by the three leaders can be seen as the result of their followers taking them, their teachings, and themselves too seriously. On another level, the theme also plays out in terms of the content of the fables themselves. There is a sense of fun and of mischief about the content of all three, enabling their thematic and moral points to be made in a much more engaging manner than if the stories and the author took themselves as seriously as some of the characters in the collection.

In terms of the themes of individuality/identity and responsibility, both play out in all three stories. In "Burnout", the Scavenger Fish is in essentially the same position as The Man on the Bridge and John's wife in that she has been placed in a position of responsibility by others. The difference between the fish and those other characters is that her position is, on some level, a reflection of her own identity. Her rebellion, therefore, is less against what she is being asked to do but more that what she does is being taken for granted. It's ironic, though, that this stance against imposed responsibility results in her being perceived as abdicating her identity because she is no longer sucking up shit (the author's word), the powers that be outside the tank decide she is no longer useful and throw her out. Again, it is interesting to note here that the character is portrayed as female.

The first point to note about "Narcissus" is that its title comes from ancient mythology - specifically, the Greek myth about the young man who fell so in love with his own reflection in a river that he was unable to move from the spot and starved to death, eventually being transformed into a flower. In the myth, there are echoes of the fables "Caught in Her Own Web" and "The Wallflower", in that the central characters there are so obsessed with the perfections for which they feel responsible that they lose their lives and identities. That point aside, "Narcissus" also reflects the themes of individuality in that individuality is at first undermined by the scientific approach to creation and then satirized, in the created individual's obsession with him or herself and responsibility. It's also interesting to note that there are echoes in "Narcissus" of "The Curse", in that the screen-staring individuals, obsessed with themselves, take similar actions and are described in similar terms to the individuals referred to by Satan. Here again, the author pokes fun at his own profession of psychotherapy and in doing so, questions the validity of an individual spending so much time thinking about and/or analyzing the self rather taking active responsibility for the self's well being.

Finally in this section there is "Tradition" which, like the "Interlude," takes three well known figures, places them in dialogue, and has them play out consideration of the narrative's primary themes. The fable's relationship with the theme of communication has been discussed above. In terns of responsibility and identity, the story is a portrait of how intellectuality betrays itself and its ideals when its self-responsibility has been taken over by others. Specifically, Moses, Marx and Freud all have had responsibility for

discussing, implementing, and evolving their ideas taken over by others who, in turn and according to the three leaders, have over-inflated their sense of self, of importance, and identity to the point where the identity and not the idea is the point. Their action at the end of the story to sign the document suggests an attempt to regain responsibility for their identities and their ideas, but the narrative gives the clear sense that it's too little too late.

Epilogue

Epilogue Summary

In the first part of the Epilogue, the characters from the various fables discuss their situations. Some reveal the endings to their stories - the Dangling Man, for example, reveals that after the First Man let go the rope, he "swam to shore, got another rope, and went back to wait for the next passer by". Meanwhile, other characters such as the Flower, the Magic-Ring Woman, the Fly express their hope for a different ending, while still others such as the Lamb, the Tiger, Jane, Jean, and the Dreaming Woman) wish to have been given different circumstances in which to function. Many of the characters refer, in one way or another, to "him." Finally, the Scavenger Fish comments that "what really burned her out was His scatological eschatology." In other words, "his" drawing parallels between shit, his scatological perspective, and eschatology, views of death.

In Part 2, the discussion continues, except the various speakers are not identified as they argue about their origins, which came first, character or story, about how they've all been used by the author for his own purposes, how they're resentful of his control, and how he needs his characters to help himself be perceived as immortal.

In Part Three, speakers are once again identified as they argue about the value of relationships, and about what keeps characters tied to one another. The Bacterium comments that the "people have more problems with closeness" than he does with the Virus, who in turn comments that "maybe they are us."

In Part Four, the speakers are again unidentified as the characters argue about whether they're fiction or non-fiction and true or real, about whether they have a right to existence outside of what the author wants for them and / or defines them, and whether the author is offering answers or just raising questions.

In Part Five, Freud, Marx and Moses reveal that in their efforts to separate themselves from their followers, they discovered that the lines between their teachings had become blurred. After Ms. Muffet comments that their efforts were a waste, the three philosophers reveal what they learned from their experience: "If you want to preserve your ideas, keep them to yourself."

Part Six sees another return to the anonymous speakers, in which the characters again complain about being badly treated by the author. They debate whether there's more than one author, whether the author is really in charge, and whether they could ask for different endings to their stories.

In Part Seven, the anonymous speakers debate about whether it would be possible for them each to have their own independent, autonomous existence, and whether the author would pay attention. As they comment on how difficult the publication process has become, then the author himself appears, negotiating with Satan for more freedom

for his characters. Meaning, he says, is not in the story or in the character. "It's in the interpretation," he says. "It's all in the interpretation."

Epilogue Analysis

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Characters

The Characters in General

The characters in these fables, as is generally the case with characters in similar stories are essentially defined by function rather than identity or by purpose rather than by realism. They exist to prove a point about human behavior and for that reason are uni-dimensional, embodying one or two particular human characteristics in order for the fable to make its point ABOUT those characteristics. In other words, while other narratives strive to develop complex, multi-faceted characters, characters in fables are, in general, intensely vivid portrayals of a SINGLE facet of humanity, designed and shaped in order to serve the author's instructional purpose.

The point is not made to suggest that characters in fables are not defined by other traditional narrative elements. On the contrary, the narrative elements of many fables are defined by the common protagonist and antagonist relationship with protagonists undergoing journeys of transformation and struggling to achieve their goals, and antagonists providing obstacles to those journeys and/or defining those struggles by their very opposition. In fables, however, the struggles and the opposition of protagonist and antagonist are defined by the fable's moral point as described above. Also, here and in other fables, protagonist/antagonist relationships are more vividly defined than in other narratives, for the reasons outlined above to make a moral point, the characters in a fable have to very clearly embody the opposing perspectives of the point.

The Author

While the author appears as an actual character only in the book's final moments, he is nevertheless an important presence throughout the collection. To begin with, there is the sense that the commentary at the beginning of each of the four sections is defined by his general perspective on human relationships, and also by his specific beliefs about particular aspects of those relationships. also speaks eloquently in the Prologue about his relationship with both his characters and their stories. Specifically, the author indicates that the characters in the various fables made their presence vividly felt. In other words, and to echo a commonly used phrase, they "spoke" to him. His description of his relationship to them suggests that they, in effect, told him their stories, and he essentially transcribed them. He was their mouthpiece, the medium through which they communicated. Such an experience is a common one, with many authors echoing the sentiments of the author her that in some way, characters can take their stories in directions quite different from what the author may have intended. In other words, there is the sense that the experience of the author of "Friedman's Fables" is, in many ways, an archetypal one where his experience echoes and/or embodies that of ALL authors in the same way as the experiences of his characters echo and/or embody their own particular, vividly defined experience of being a human.

Finally, and ironically, the characters speak of the Author as though he is something of a god, as an entity who has almost too MUCH power over their destinies. In this particular section, the language of the characters is that of rebellion, a circumstance which, when combined with the author's sense that they were in control of their stories, seems on some level to fit.

The Men on the Bridge, John and his Wife

These characters playing out narratives exploring the issue of imposed versus personal responsibility. Specifically, the Man on the Bridge and John's Wife are both are expected to take responsibility for the feelings and situations of others and both eventually take action to simultaneously reject those "imposed" responsibilities and accept "personal" responsibility for themselves, their own well being, and their own identity. As such, they embody the first of the collection's key theme of responsibility.

The Lamb, the Moth and the Fly, Billy's Parents

These characters also explore issues related to the theme of personal responsibility or more specifically, by the lack thereof, as defined by fear in the Lamb, by limited perspective in the Fly, and by the desire to control others without considering the self in the Moth and Billy's Parents.

The

The story of the so-called "First Family" is another examination of the theme of responsibility. On one level, the fable opines that parents don't take enough conscious responsibility for raising their children, suggesting that children learn as much through observation as by direct example and/or teaching. On another level, its narrative style can be seen as an indictment of how too much responsibility is being handed over to others - in other words, parents look to outside influences to tell them how to raise their families.

The Living Dead Man, The Demons of Resistance

All these characters, appearing in Part 2 of "The Demons of Resistance," manifest that part's thematic focus on struggles between characters who attempt to control the identity of others.

The Creator, Satan

The Creator and Satan are portrayed here as colleagues, working together to shape and define the destinies of humanity. They come across, in some way, as the archetypal good cop "Creator" versus the bad cop "Satan" duo, both out to achieve the same end

but employing opposing tactics, nurturing or good cop versus confrontation or the bad cop.

Faust, Oedipus, Cassandra

These three characters from literature and myth appear in an Interlude, arguing questions related to the issue of personal responsibility as opposed to dramatizing those same questions as the fables do.

The Shipwrecked Man, Jean and Jane

These characters appear in the third section, and are the central figures in stories exploring the nature of identity, specifically commenting on the loss of self and individuality that results from wanting too much to be like another.

The Alluring Woman and her Grandmother, the Sleeping Woman,

These characters, also appearing in the third section, struggle with questions of internal vs. external identity, the tension between self-ness as defined by the tension between desire and fear such as the Alluring Woman, the demands of others such as the Sleeping Woman, and the belief's of others such as Cinderella's Stepmother.

Ms. Muffet and Mrs. Brown

The story of Ms. Muffet, the over-controlling spider with the perfect web, is another fable about responsibility. Specifically, it addresses taking too much responsibility for one aspect of life at the expense of another, perhaps more important. Mrs. Brown, whose experience of obsession is in many ways parallel to that of Ms. Muffet suggests that at the core of such a misplacement of responsibility is a kind of delusion.

Moses, Sigmund Freud, Karl Marx

These three characters are essentially interpretations, manifestations of the author's apparent thematic concern with responsibility. Specifically, this is apparent in individuals placing too much responsibility for their personal well being on the teachings of others as opposed to on their own needs, experiences and beliefs. It's interesting to note that each of these figures is defined by a particular moral and/or intellectual status such as the Hebrew lawgiver Moses, a man who might be called the "lawgiver" of psychoanalysis in Freud, and a man who might be called the "lawgiver" of left-wing, socialist politics and morality in Marx.

Objects/Places

Fables

Fables are stories, generally short, written as commentary on a particular aspect of humanity but often using non-human characters like animals or inanimate objects to make their point. They are based on and defined by behavior, rather than on fact.

A fable is a form of allegory, a narrative that communicates meaning through imagery. It is, on some level, an extended metaphor illustrating a particular moral point, generally doing so outside any particular religious context. "Aesop's Fables" are perhaps the most well known of this sort of story.

The Friendly Forest

The Friendly Forest is the ironically named setting for the story of the fearful Lamb and the Tiger who, the narrative suggests, is simply being himself.

An American Holly

The holly, a hedge plant or shrub with glossy and sharply pointed leaves, is traditionally associated with Christmas, but in the story that bears its name plays a key role in that particular narrative's exploration of individual identity.

Psychotherapy

Psychotherapy is the study and practice of treating the human psyche or the mind, spirit, feelings, and the conscious, unconscious, and subconscious. Psychotherapy was essentially developed by Sigmund Freud, whose investigations into human behavior revealed, in his mind and in the subsequent minds of many thousands, that motivations for behavior ran deeper, and were in most cases more complicated, than had traditionally been believed.

The Bacterium and the Virus

Bacteria and viruses are single celled organisms, differentiated in several ways. Bacteria have no nucleus, can sometimes have beneficial effects, and can function independently. Viruses have nuclei, are universally negative in effect, and can only function parasitically. In "Symbiosis," the Virus lives within the Bacterium, a situation that triggers the mutual discontent that, in turn, triggers their argument.

The Island

This isolated tropical island is the home of a secretive community of individuals who live their lives in profound connection to one another. That connection manifests in a complex network of interrelationships resulting from various umbilical cord connections, the umbilical cord being the cord formed between mother and child during pregnancy through which the child receives nutrition.

The Magic Ring

In Part 3, the "magic ring" enables the wearer to keep the elf safe from emotional involvement with potential bad mates. It serves as a metaphoric representation of the dangers of keeping oneself too safe from self-identity and feeling.

Ms. Muffet's Web

In "Caught in Her Own Web," Ms. Muffet's perfect web is a metaphoric representation of the dangers associated with becoming too obsessed with elements of life other than one's own well being and identity. In other words, do not define yourself by externals.

The Wallflower

The term "wallflower" is generally used to describe someone or something who remains on the outside of relationships, situations, or circumstances. It is most commonly used to describe people who remain on the sidelines at places like parties or dances. Like Ms. Muffet's web, the perfectly formed, perfectly scented wallflower serves as a metaphoric warning against becoming too involved with externals.

The Domino

In yet another dramatization of the importance of individual identity, a single Domino stands firm and confident against the chain reaction onslaught of hundreds of similar dominoes.

The Scavenger Fish

Scavenger fish such as catfish, both in aquariums and in the context of sea life in general, tend to stay close to the bottom of their home body of water, eating the remnants of food dropped by other fish and, at times, eating their waste material. The scavenger fish portrayed in "Burnout" can be seen as representing the sort of individual used inconsiderately by others that eventually decides enough is enough, I'm going to survive and thrive on my own terms.

Themes

Personal Responsibility

This is the collection's primary theme, a concern with individuals taking responsibility for themselves for their own well being, for their own futures, and for their identities. Over and over again, the fables explore situations in which individuals hand over responsibility for their lives to other people such as "The Bridge," define themselves by how others respond to them such as "The Wallflower," or become focused on external circumstances to the eventual detriment of their own self-worth and well being such as "Caught in Her Own Web." At the same time, both the collection and the stories within it seem to celebrate individuals who take a strong, self-responsible, independent stance such as "Panic," who insist that the voice of their unique personal experience be heard such as "Cinderella," or refuse to give in to the will of others and thereby define their own destiny such as "An American Holly." Finally, several stories in the collection paint satiric portraits of those who attempt to take responsibility for the lives of others such as "Net Results," who project their fears onto others rather than taking responsible action to deal with them such as "The Friendly Forest," and who hand over responsibility for their choices and situations to external forces such as "The Magic Ring." Ultimately, all these stories are expressing facets of the same essential thematic statement - that each individual must take responsibility for his own life and actions, and allow others to do the same. In other words, the collection is making a moral case for individuality.

Individuality and Identity

The collection's celebration and advocacy of individuality is a secondary or sub-theme, an offshoot of its primary thematic consideration of personal responsibility. In other words, the collection that suggests claiming, defining, and living according to individual identity is the primary responsibility of each human being. Each of the stories listed above expresses this particular manifestation of responsibility in one way or another, as do most of the other fables. It's important to note, however, that there are both positive portrayals of individuality and negative portrayals of circumstances in which individuality has gone too far such as crept into the realm of self-absorption and selfishness. Examples of positive portrayals can be found in "Burnout," "Panic," and "An American Holly," while examples of negative portrayals of individuality can be found in "Narcissus," "Caught in Her Own Web," and "Round in Circles."

It's interesting to note that both these thematic perspectives, it could be argued, give the book as a whole and the individual fables within it a notably conservative perspective, at least in terms of what the word conservative has come to mean. Conservative thinking and morality has, over the years, come to value the individual over the group, the identity and integrity and pre-eminence of the self over the well being of the community at large. There are also stories in the collection in which its thematic consideration of individuality is explored with a degree of ambivalence, portraying it as neither good nor

bad and allowing the reader to come to his/her own conclusion. Examples of this ambivalence of perspective can be found in "Symbiosis," "Attachment," "Jean and Jane," "The Curse," and "Soaring."

Finally, it's also interesting to note that almost none of the stories deal with a community, and the few that do tend to portray it as a negative influence, particularly when it comes to individuality and identity.

Communication

The author suggests in his Prologue and in the brief commentaries introducing each section that one of his narrative and thematic priorities in creating the fables was the exploration of communication, and specifically the various aspects of contemporary communication that obstruct openness and honesty in relationships. These include an insistence upon proper usage, inner resistances, relationships that define how communication transpires, and instinctive reactions.

This theme manifests in two main ways. The first is in the existence of the fables themselves, specifically the author's choice of this particular style of storytelling to explore his moral and psychological perspectives. The stories are short, entertaining, engaging, and entertaining, all of which enable him to make his points more clearly and his readers to both accept and understand those points. The second way this theme manifests is in the relationships and situations of many of the characters. In a number of cases, the fables make the clear suggestion that tensions could be defused, misunderstandings could be avoided, and the thematically essential questions of responsibility and identity could be more easily be resolved if the characters would just communicate. Among the fables that make this point is "A Nervous Condition," in which the tension between John and his wife would never have gotten to the point of violence that it does if John's wife had communicated her growing discontentment. Then there is "Net Results. Interesting that both these stories, anchored in a failure to communicate, feature married couples as the central characters. There is also failure to communicate in "Jean and Jane", the end of communication in "Narcissus," and a bewailing of humanity's lack of communication with itself in "Tradition".

Style

Point of View

The fables, the Interlude and the Epilogue are written from the third-person point of view. At times the narrative voice is omniscient, recounting the experiences of all the characters with an equal amount of detail and insight such as "Symbiosis," "Soaring," "The Power of Belief," and "Projection." At other times, the narrative voice focuses on the experience and perspective of a single character, making the point of view more limited such as "The Bridge," "The Friendly Forest," "Net Results," "The Magic Ring," "Cinderella," and "The Wallflower." In all cases, the narrative voice is describing events from a particular moral perspective as broadly defined by one of the collection's general themes and as specifically defined by one or more facets of those themes.

On another level, the authorial point of view is something different from the narrative point of view. While the latter primarily manifests in the content and style of the stories, the former is more defined by purpose. As the Prologue indicates, one of the author's primary purposes in creating the fables was to manifest his desire for and interest in effective and accessible communication. To that end, he employs fairly straightforward storytelling techniques, a varied but not pretentious vocabulary, humor, and above all familiarity. In other words, he tells simple stories in a simple way, making important points in ways that cause readers to welcome thought and self-study rather than feel intimidated, dismissive, or judged.

Setting

For the most part, setting plays an almost non-existent role in the collection and in the individual narratives. This is due in part to the fact that as a style of story-telling, fables are generally less interested in the "where" or "when" of a story than in the "what", the "who", and the moral "why." This is not necessarily a bad thing, since another general point about fables is that they are intended to be universal, with emotional, spiritual, intellectual and moral resonances that transcend any sort of division, boundary, or setting in place or time. In other words, the characters in these fables and the varied human conditions they embody, not to mention the behavior being dramatized in their relationships, would probably be recognizable anywhere, in any circumstance. Lack of setting enhances this sense of universality, this sense that the values and situations chronicled by the fables are archetypal, the essential premise that the human truths on display in each individual story and in the collection as a whole are true anywhere.

There are a couple of minor exceptions - see the analyses for "Narcissus," "The Wallflower," "Attachment," and "The Friendly Forest." Then there is the setting of "An American Holly." The title suggests that the setting for this particular fable is indeed America, but nowhere in the fable itself does the narrative actually place the action there. The point is not made to suggest that the story is NOT set in America, but rather

to suggest that the "American" of the title is possibly more of a reference to the attitude and experience of the holly than to the place where it grows.

Language and Meaning

The first point to consider about "Language and Meaning" in these fables is the author's essential thematic intent - to communicate in the most effective and engaging way possible. Language is, therefore, the primary component of his realization of that intent. There is an interesting, and very effective, balance between this casual, relaxed language and the somewhat heightened vocabulary referenced in "Point of View" above. Said vocabulary is challenging but not confrontational, with the "big" words being longer, somewhat unfamiliar, and a degree or too more demanding in terms of denotation and connotation than everyday words, but which ultimately fit effectively and unobtrusively into the other, more colloquial words.

A second, and related, point to note about "Language and Meaning" is that while each of the fables in the collection explores a moral truth and, in many ways, embodies a moral teaching, the language used to communicate that truth is neither preachy nor confrontational, neither judgmental nor patronizing. Neither is there a summing up of the moral at either the beginning or the end of each fable. In other words, the reader is left to interpret the fable, its meaning and its moral value, him or her self. This, in turn, can be seen as a manifestation of the collection's thematic interest in individuality and self-responsibility, with the reader being asked to come to his/her own understanding of the story and by extension, of self and identity.

Structure

As noted in "Point of View" above, each fable in the collection is structured in a traditional, fairly straightforward way. Characters and stories move clearly, and in a fundamentally linear fashion, from beginning through middle to end, from set up through complication into resolution, with each character undergoing some sort of journey of transformation along the way. This simple structure, which has been underpinning narratives of all sorts since narrative began, is particularly useful when it comes to supporting the essential purpose of the fables and the simpler and more straightforward the context, the more comfortable and secure the reader is going to be. To look at it another way, when the reader doesn't have to worry and/or think about "how" a story is being told, he or she is more free and more open to the "what," the "who," and most importantly in this case, the "why."

Meanwhile, the collection as a whole is broken down into four components, each of which explores a particular facet of the author's thematic interest in communication.

Finally, the collection is bracketed by the Prologue and by the Epilogue. The Prologue and Epilogue frame the collection of fables quite effectively, in that as the two sets of voices, authorial and character, essentially meet in the middle in a way that reinforces

the author's comments in the Prologue suggesting that the works are essentially a collaboration between author and subject, between storyteller and story being told.

Quotes

"...the characters...had become my companions. They were not merely my creations but, ultimately...my partners in creation. They had even influenced the development of one another" (pg. 2.)

"Why has all the intelligence, and wisdom, and experience, and knowledge that has advanced our species in so many other areas of civilization not worked nearly as well in the improvement of our species itself? Is it that human nature is simply human nature? Are we all somehow cursed? Or is it...that we are all caught up in myths about what it takes to get others to hear?" (pg. 3-4.)

"...that communication is a cerebral phenomenon rather than an emotional process; that insight will work with people who are unmotivated to change; that resistance to your message can be overcome by trying harder; that seriousness is deeper than playfulness" (pg. 4.)

"People can only hear you when they are moving toward you, and they are not likely to when your words are pursuing them. Even the choicest words lose their power when they are used to overpower" (pg. 5.)

"'If I let go, all my life I will know that I let this other die. If I stay, I risk losing my momentum toward my own long-sought-after salvation. Either way this will haunt me forever'" (pg. 12.)

"There was something wrong, thought the lamb, with the notion that an agreement is equal if the invasive creature agrees to be less invasive and the invaded one agrees to tolerate some invasiveness" (pg. 27.)

"It may be this constant expectation that the other should be his keeper that prevents each from taking responsibility for himself" (pg. 49.)

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"From every cut and wound and point from which a parted limb had gone, a hundred prickly, scorning tongues" (pg. 64.)

"The only way she knew he wasn't dead was that whenever she left the room for long periods of time, the caterpillar, upon her return, would always be in a different part of his box. However, in her presence, he never moved" (pg. 87.)

"'Everyone will marry the one who brings out the worst in them ... everyone will choose a mate based on their bad habits rather than their good ones. No-one will choose a partner who challenges them to grow. Everyone will choose mates who play into the very games they're used to playing, instead of being attracted to those who strengthen their own assets'" (pg. 92.)

"'Do you have any idea how many behavior patterns now have names, how many idiosyncrasies have labels, how many foibles are called symptoms, how many approaches there are to change, how many factors can be blamed for no change?" (Oedipus, pg. 99.)

"'The real molder of denial...was not the absence of something, such as courage, but the presence of something, the pursuit of certainty...civilization is not the result of repression; rather, it takes shape out of the manifestations of denial.'" (Cassandra, pg. 104.)

"'It does not seem to occur to anyone that if ancient literature makes sense today, then the forces that mold our lives have not really changed" (Faust, pg. 105.)

"'...the pantheon of outside forces to which mortals attribute their personal destiny is as present as before; the gods have merely changed their names. Now they are known as genes, gender, class, race, symptoms, the age, peer groups, statistics (which doubles as a Trojan Horse) and Zeus, all powerful king of the gods, is now called a dysfunctional family of origin'" (Cassandra, pg. 106.)

"'You are going against your nature,' said the Virus. 'Only against my past behavior' [said the Bacterium]. 'What's the difference?' 'That's what I want to find out'" pg. 114.)

"Anger was unknown, depression was easily cured, crime was unheard of, envy and jealousy never spawned, and competition and rivalry were totally absent. There was no such thing as embarrassment, nor any of those behavior patterns that we have come to call neuroses" pg. 123.)

"Jean was not really less attractive, yet she attracted less. Jane was not really a superficial butterfly, yet she was never alone" (pg. 129.)

"Her air of abandonment drew men like half-blind moths to some far off flickering light, which, since it was not really burning, produced more disappointment than destruction. For they flew in, hardly in control, only to bounce off something hard, whereupon, half-stunned, they fluttered a bit but then flew on toward other attractions" (pg. 138.)

"...such is the nature of webs that whenever one part is realigned, another part will inevitably be thrown off...the perfect web must be produced on the first try...one does not cause these things to happen. They are, rather, the result of what life deals out" (pg. 161.)

"Visitors to the field always noticed her, but no-one ever picked her. It was as though everyone sensed that she should be left for others to see" (pg. 168.)

"Some tried to calculate the power in ergs of energy as against the rest mass of their own weight. Others wondered if perhaps some aerodynamic innovation could be conceived to drag this juggernaut to a halt. Still others considered the possibility that...they could bring their own strength to greater, hitherto unimagined, peaks. And

several thought of sacrificing themselves for the greater good by falling before their turn" (pg. 176-177.)

"She always knew her place, the bottom, never...rose to the surface unless some debris had failed to settle, and, even as more and more fish were added to the tank, never, absolutely never, tired of taking crap from the others" (pg. 182.)

"Caterpillar: 'Well, I understand your story. It's mine I can't figure out.' Domino: 'That's the way we all feel. Everyone understands everyone else's but not their own'" (pg. 205.)

"Moses thought he was going into a synagogue, and it turned out to be group therapy; I went to a lecture on the ego and the id, and it turned out to be an Easter sunrise mass' and when Marx saw a huge billboard advertising 'The Proletariat", it turned out to be a rock group" (Freud, pg. 211.)

"...he gave us talent without motivation / and intelligence without discipline / and ability without ambition / and leadership without stamina / and beauty without confidence / and attractiveness without integrity" (pg. 211-212.)

Topics for Discussion

Identify the protagonist and antagonist for each fable. Discuss the protagonist's journey of transformation and the role played by the antagonist in defining and shaping that journey.

Identify the moral value explored in each fable, and discuss the point/statement made about those moral values.

Consider the fables with so-called "ambivalent" perspectives on individuality such as the "The Power of Belief," "Soaring," "Symbiosis," "Attachment," and "Jean and Jane." Discuss the positive and negative aspects of individuality as defined in these stories. What thematically relevant point is each story ultimately making about individuality?

Discuss the ways in which the collection portrays community. Consider primarily "The Friendly Forest," "The Power of Belief," "Attachment," "Burnout," and "Narcissus," but look at the other stories as well for implied statements on the nature and function of community.

Do you think the Man on the Bridge would have behaved differently or made a different choice if the Man with the Rope had not chosen to force him into a position of responsibility? Is there a difference between such enforced responsibility and situations in which individuals have NO choice but to rely on other people such as the elderly or the disabled? What is the responsibility of the relied-upon individual in THAT circumstance?

Why is the name "Friendly Forest" ironic?

In "Round in Circles," what ways are the Moth and the Fly similar? In what ways does the title apply to them both?

What makes the holly in "An American Holly" so particularly American?

Discuss whether the relationships between the natives on the island in "Attachment" are intended to be perceived as positive or negative. Consider both sets of circumstances in which those relationships exist, before the cords are severed and after.

Would you want such a ring as mentioned in the "The Magic Ring?" Why or why not?

In suggesting that the woman in "The Lesson" is being prevented from responding to the attentions of her husband by her parents, what is the fable suggesting about individual identity? What does it say about the relationship between parents and children?

Write a version of the "Cinderella" fairy tale from the perspective of the father, or one of the step-sisters, or the prince.

Discuss the leader and follower relationship in "Tradition." What responsibility does the follower have to the leader and to the self? What responsibility does the leader have to the self and to the follower?