

The Fool's Progress: An Honest Novel Study Guide

**The Fool's Progress: An Honest Novel by Edward
Abbey**

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Plot Summary

The Fool's Progress by Edward Abbey is a pseudo-autobiographical novel of Abbey's own life. Henry Lightcap, the main character of the story, is an alcoholic who has spent much of his life meandering from woman to woman and place to place without steady employment or a sense of true identity. The novel begins in Arizona with Lightcap's wife, Elaine, leaving him. Elaine is not the first to leave Lightcap in his life, and he reveals she is in fact one of many woman who has left him behind because of his drinking, his general attitude, his waywardness and his drunkenness. Lightcap sets out with his dying dog to return to the place of his birth in the Appalachian mountains, Stump Creek, where much of his family still lives.

Over the course of the novel, as Lightcap travels across the country, the reader is treated to flashbacks that allow the reader a deeper understanding of Lightcap's character. The story tells of his friends, who often support Henry in his life choices because those choices fit with their own. His friends destroy a homestead he is charged with keeping during a housewarming party, for example. Others support his drinking, knowing he is a severe alcoholic. Still others help him to find employment that allows him the freedom to not settle down.

While Lightcap is a womanizer and an alcoholic, the reader comes to realize that the man has suffered tremendously throughout his life. He has loved many woman and always tries to do his best, but his inability to stay in one area and his addiction to alcohol and women often disrupt his noble plans. He holds positions as a forest ranger for half of the year and wanders the country the other half. His most beloved woman and second wife, Claire, seems to be his soul mate, although she is his junior by decades. They marry, and she supports his part-time employment status and seems to enjoy their wandering life together. She gives birth to their child in a remote cabin but begins to hemorrhage. She dies in a car accident as Lightcap attempts to drive her to a hospital. The child, a daughter, is taken by Claire's mother and is never seen by Henry.

From that point forward in life, Henry uses alcohol and other woman to hide his loneliness and despair. He marries again, to Elaine, but following a drunken binge, he is hospitalized. He learns at the hospital that he is dying of pancreatic cancer, which has no cure. He does not tell his wife, who soon leaves him. At the end of the novel, readers finally understand that Henry is going home essentially to die. The novel is heart wrenching, humorous, dramatic, and intense from beginning to end. Beautifully written, using traditional Edward Abbey attention to detail in nature, the novel not only presents a breathtaking view of the United States nearly from coast to coast, but also presents a comprehensive examination of one man and how his actions in life affect the outcome of his existence.



A Prelude, Chapter 1, In Mendia Res, Arizona, and Chapter 2, 1927-37: Stump Creek, West Virginia

A Prelude, Chapter 1, In Mendia Res, Arizona, and Chapter 2, 1927-37: Stump Creek, West Virginia Summary

In "A Prelude", a teacher yells from the door of a one-room school house in the Appalachian Mountains for Henry Lightcap, who does not arrive. She thinks she can see him off in the woods, playing.

In chapter one, Henry's third wife, Elaine, leaves him for good after yet another argument. For the moment, he is glad, but he knows misery will soon set in. Annoyed by the sound, Henry shoots the refrigerator. He then puts on loud music and begins to drink. A neighbor calls, asking about the gunfire, and Henry lies. He contemplates calling one of his other women lovers, but instead decides to bake bread to soothe his nerves. He thinks of visiting his brother Will, and calls his doctor friend, Andrew Harrington, for comfort. He recalls he and Elaine's problems as he calls Melanie, a lover. She hangs up on him. He drunkenly recalls a therapy session Elaine forced him to sign up for where he eventually angered everyone and asked for a refund. He then went and got drunk. Henry slips in and out of consciousness, thinking of various women, and knows he needs to return to his brother Will's, which is 3,500 miles away. Waking, Henry plays piano, makes a large breakfast, and begins to plan. As he cooks, he recalls Elaine's foray into gourmet cooking, and recalls hurting her feelings each time he didn't want to eat her poached eggs, her seaweed, or her other foods. She begins jogging, and becomes a feminist. They argue about Elaine not having orgasms, and Henry rants about women as powerful creatures already in charge of things. Henry plans to go to Stump Creek with a secret to see Will.

In chapter two, Henry is recalling part of his childhood. In his memory, his mother, Lorraine, is giving birth to Henry while his father, Joe, watches. Will is the oldest brother by two years. The family is poor, but happy. The Lightcaps are half Shawnee, and Henry recounts the story of his grandmother, Milly Cornflower Lightcap, who was the doctor of a medicine man named Doctor Jim. He recalls how she showed Will and Henry treasures of their heritage when they were young. When she died, she was buried with her Indian relatives, where Joe often said he would like to be buried, as he cherished his heritage. The boys help Joe in another memory of Henry's, as he works the field. Henry and his brother Will help with the potatoes and are paid, but they also play poker with their father on the weekends, and often lose their pay. Lorraine and Joe often playfully argue over the intelligence of Will and the waywardness of Henry. Henry recalls his mother, a small woman with a strong heart who was, and still is, beautiful. She often



stood up to Joe, who loved her dearly, and won. Henry also recalls smoking corn silk cigarettes in the barn with Will. It was always Will who felt guilty first and went back to work when called. Henry often stayed and went back at his leisure. He also recalls Will expertly shooting a rabbit, while Henry often stopped work early. One evening, Joe takes the boys to the train yard to steal coal. He tells them firmly not to ride the train, but they do. Henry forgets to get off when he should, and travels seven miles from home. He walks back. He is spanked by his father, but his mother notes that Henry is clearly just as "dogged" as his brother, since he has shown tenacity through his adventure. Joe notes that Henry is in for a life of trouble and Lorraine smiles, noting that at least it won't be a dull life.

A Prelude, Chapter 1, In Mendia Res, Arizona, and Chapter 2, 1927-37: Stump Creek, West Virginia Analysis

In the "Preface", the author describes the countryside where Henry Lightcap grows up. From this short introduction, it is clear that Henry is missing from school and has instead decided to play in the woods. This is the first glimpse the reader has of Henry, and it shows already his distaste for education and his lack of respect for others.

In chapter one, readers are introduced to Henry Lightcap as an adult. Henry is clearly a disturbed man, one whose life has led him astray. Henry's shooting of the refrigerator is the first sign that he is teetering on the edge. Even from this brief beginning, it is certain Henry drinks considerably and that there is something deeply wrong in Henry's life. He often thinks of and dares death, and claims to have a secret. This foreshadows the knowledge at the end of the novel when Henry reveals he is dying.

When Henry recounts his marriage to Elaine, readers are given a deeper insight into his marriage problems. It is clear that Elaine married Henry believing he could change with her changing desires. However, Henry is set in his ways and is unable to support his wife in her choices, since he is unwilling to change his own. Elaine is not happy, and Henry, although he cares, is unable to please her sexually, emotionally, or materialistically. His womanizing and drinking behaviors take him away from her, and in the end, she chooses another who is able to give her what she needs in life. It is clear that Henry loves Elaine, in his own way, but that Henry is unable to properly love another human being. This knowledge is given reason later in the novel when readers are told of his second wife, Claire, and her untimely death. Also, from this chapter, readers begin to understand that Will, Henry's brother, seems to represent freedom and safety for Henry, and that his plans are to travel across the country to seek his family.

In chapter two, Henry's past reveals more about his roots. The knowledge that Henry comes from a farming background with a stubborn, hardworking, loving father explains some of what readers already see in Henry. Joe, his father, held a strong sense of pride in his heritage, and this is shared by Henry, as well. Even as a child, Will was the hard working, diligent, sensible son while Henry was the one more apt to find trouble and a



way out of work. Stories of him remaining in the barn to smoke as Will goes to work, and of his own train ride show him to be, at an early age, a daredevil whose intentions often lead him astray. Henry, as a child, is not a trouble maker, but often makes trouble as a result of his actions, which are seldom thought through. His mother seemed to understand that Henry's life would be interesting, but his father understood that it would be filled with trouble, not because Henry was trouble, but because Henry had a tendency to make decisions that lead to problems.



Chapter 3, Henry Begins His Retreat through Chapter 6, Will's War

Chapter 3, Henry Begins His Retreat through Chapter 6, Will's War Summary

In chapter three, Henry awakens from his passed out state and hears military helicopters overhead. He packs a few items into his truck and feeds a Nizoral to his dying dog, Solstice. Solstice has valley fever, and Nizoral will help slow the disease. He calls Melanie again, only to be rebuffed. He calls into the welfare office where he works to take time off, only to discover he has been fired. He then writes a note to Will, noting he is stopping to see friends on the way but that he is coming home to West Virginia. He writes a farewell note to Elaine, letting her know he loves her but that he understands why she left him. He leaves the dog, but sees Solstice in his review mirror as he drives away. Unable to leave her alone, he returns and takes her with him. Henry is annoyed by traffic, but arrives at the bank, only to discover Elaine has already emptied his account and he is over his credit limit on his card. He heads to the Dirty Shame Saloon, a home away from home, for one last drink. He thinks of calling his friends to say goodbye, but thinks it is better if he can imagine he will be coming back. He goes to the restroom and reads the writing on the walls. He leaves, and begins his long journey back to West Virginia with his dog and his alcohol close at hand. He stops to urinate and finds a baseball glove in the ditch.

In chapter four, Henry recalls when he was fifteen years old. He hates high school but loves to watch girls get on the bus. Most of all, however, Henry loves baseball and enjoys a rivalry against a nearby town's team called the Blacklick team. Henry and Will choose the players that will help them beat the Blacklicks, but find themselves one player short. They decide on a local boy named Red Ginter. Red is seventeen and only made it through fourth grade but is their only option. When they ask his father if he can play Red's father agrees, but only if Red's younger brother Leroy can also play. Red agrees to play. On the day of the game, both teams play well. Red hits the baseball like a golf ball and misses at bat each time. Henry is a great pitcher, particularly with Will as his catcher, and both are fair batters. By the bottom of the seventh, Blacklick is ahead 21 to 16. The score soon becomes 21 to 19, however, with Red up to bat. Red hits a home run but refuses to run the bases. The game is called a tie. By the end of that same summer, Henry loses his virginity and Will remains loyal to the farm.

In chapter five, Henry stops for more beer and to give a young Indian hitchhiker a ride. He lets the man off later, noting that he is drunk enough to likely sleep in a ditch, which Henry calls voluntary simplicity. He stops to urinate and gives a detailed description of the beautiful landscape around him. He again thinks of suicide. He and Solstice travel forward, and Henry notes the billboards with their modern conveniences. He stops for coffee and describes his tired waitress and the small Vietnamese boss of the cafe. He



leaves, but realizes he will not make it to Gallup. He pulls off on a side road, goes for a walk with the dog, feeds and medicates her, eats, and goes to sleep. He thinks of Lightcaps and the Johnson-Nixon war.

In chapter six, Henry notes Joe and Paul, Henry's youngest brother, have already passed away. Marice, his sister, is a teacher and Jim, his brother, has run to Canada to avoid the Vietnam war. Will is on the farm. Henry recalls his brother Will coming home in late May of 1943, announcing he had signed up for the military. Joe is angry, but Will explains that his friends will die without a good leader and that Will is that leader for them. Henry knows Joe is secretly proud. In June, Will is off to war, and sends occasional letters home. Joe argues politics with many family members, but also praises Will. Will returns in September, but he and Joe fight. Will does not understand why his father has sold off land and animals and takes less care of farm equipment, and Joe reminds him he is the keeper of the estate. Will leaves the first night with Henry to work on the car, but leaves alone the nights after to go to town with his friends. One night he comes home with a girl and announces his engagement. Joe is not pleased with his choice, as he is a Catholic, but he accepts it. Will leaves again for the war and does not return again for two years.

Chapter 3, Henry Begins His Retreat through Chapter 6, Will's War Analysis

In chapter three, readers see another side to Henry Lightcap. His dog is dying, and Henry is unable to leave her behind, showing his own fear of dying alone. Instead, even knowing she will be a burden, he takes her along. Henry knows too, however, that he will need a constant companion on his journey, and the dog accepts him as he is, with all of his faults. Melanie, his lover, has rebuked him, and his wife has stolen the last of his money. His credit card is overdrawn, he gets a parking ticket, he is annoyed by traffic, and his calls to stop the helicopters from flying overhead all amount to nothing. Clearly, Henry's days are not well. It is also clear by the end of this chapter that Henry most likely is ill. His alcohol intake is excessive and he makes several references to his wake, his final goodbye to his friends, and of his plans not to return to Tuscon. These all foreshadow the knowledge that Henry is dying. At the end of the chapter, his finding of the glove leads to the following memory in the next chapter, showing a pattern that develops and remains for the rest of the novel.

In chapter four, Henry recalls baseball as a love of his life. Again, his revelations of his childhood lend insight into his character. His memories of a baseball rivalry with a nearby town show his childhood to be joyous and fun. Even at that age, it is clear Henry was fascinated by women and liked competition. He enjoyed the feeling of pride, but often lost that pride as his insecurities led him to make mistakes, just as they do later in his life. Will is again shown, even at this age, as being dependable and trustworthy and with a logical head on his shoulders, whereas Henry is shown as impulsive and selfish but kind and caring. In the end, Henry loses interest in baseball, trading it for girls, and Will remains dedicated to the farm.



In chapter five, Henry's theory of voluntary simplicity is first mentioned. This theory is popular throughout the novel, but is merely hinted at in this chapter. In this case, Henry uses the term to describe a drunken hitchhiker's choice to sleep off his alcohol in a ditch. Henry's constant evaluation of the world around him and the notes about the billboards along the road indicate a true love of nature and a sadness at the modernization of the world. This is yet another constant theme throughout the novel. His meeting of the Vietnamese man in the diner leads to the following chapters, which discuss the wars in which the Lightcaps have participated.

Chapter six reveals much about Will's character. Will's decision to join the military was not done out of an urge to see the world or to save his country, but out of duty to his football team. Those on his team have joined, and Will feels responsible for them, in all areas of life. Again Will is shown to be a dedicated, caring, responsible young man whose intelligence is used to protect those he loves. While Joe is outwardly angry, it is clear he is pleased, knowing his son is doing the responsible thing. When Will returns from the military, however, and begins to question his father's reasons for things, Joe is clearly angry. He is neither accustomed to nor enjoys being questioned by his sons. Will wants to keep the farm, as he plans to cultivate it one day, but Joe has plans to farm less and work more with lumber. This conflict foreshadows the storyline later in the novel as the two argue again about the use of the land. Will's engagement is another disappointment for Joe, as his choice is not as Joe would have liked, but again, this engagement shows Will to be a proper, civilized, normal young man, which pleases his mother, but again shows him glaringly different than Henry.



Chapter 7, On to Gallup, through Chapter 9, Into the Past

Chapter 7, On to Gallup, through Chapter 9, Into the Past Summary

In chapter seven, Henry wakes to take his dog for a walk, makes breakfast, and drinks more beer. He begins driving again, listening to his music, and finds himself in Navajo country. He again marvels and describes the nature around him and laments about the destruction of the land. As he nears Gallup, he reads all the billboards, noting the poorness of the area. He stops for gas, and then stops to see his friend, Don Williams, who is a gun dealer. Don tells Henry he cannot drink any longer, according to doctors, due to an irritable colon. Henry feels bad he came for support about his latest romantic trouble. The two go upstairs, where Don's wife, Jenny, makes lunch and their adopted daughter, who was abandoned with fetal alcohol syndrome, merrily runs around. The two lament about the problems of the Indians, including their overpopulation. Don then looks at a gun Henry brought him and pays him \$300, knowing he needs the money. Henry says his goodbyes and departs. He cries, then calls another friend, Van Hoss, who doesn't answer. He and Solstice return to the road, and the smell of juniper again reminds him of his youth.

In chapter eight, Henry notes he began hitchhiking around the country in 1944 while Will was at war. He believed that if he were to die for his country, he wanted to see it first. His father gives him \$20 and a ride to the highway. Their goodbye is awkward but touching. He is picked up by drunken sailors and his journey begins. Two weeks later, he finds himself in Oregon, and falls in love with the West. He is drafted, and Joe is furious. At a family picnic, Joe begins to argue with a cousin about the war and about the death of young boys for ideals they do not believe in. Joe storms off, angry, and Henry sticks up for him. Henry later reports for duty, as instructed, and spends several months in military training. He enjoys the military, and is a good shot, but not as good as Will. During drills to qualify as an expert marksman, Henry's pride interferes with his shot, and he does not qualify. Later, he asks why they are being sent to war if Japan is beaten as everyone says, and he is sent to nightly drills as punishment. That night, he and another man decide to flee if they are sent to the war. Soon, however, they learn that Japan has surrendered, and they are sent instead to Italy. He gains a mistress and generally has a wonderful time. Later, however, he feels shame at his idea to run away, and he realizes that while the men didn't need him, he needed them.

In chapter nine, Henry recalls that his license is expired. He notes that his "irritable colon" is acting up, and that he has to pull off often to relieve himself. Henry uses his credit card in places without electronic banking devices, knowing he can get away with it for a while and needing to survive. He stops for coffee and food and reads a newspaper he finds. He is amazed that the news is the same each week, and realizes the paper is



three weeks old. He argues with the cashier about the age of the newspaper, and she notes he can buy a new copy outside. He leaves and begins driving through the mountains, noting their beauty. He nears Albuquerque and thinks of Van Hoss, his friend, and a housewarming party.

Chapter 7, On to Gallup, through Chapter 9, Into the Past Analysis

In chapter seven, the author allows his personal feelings about the plight of the Southwest Indian population to bleed through his storyline. Henry arrives in Navajo country, and his descriptions of nature, as well as of the poverty and destruction of the Gallup area, note the author's displeasure at the state of the Southwest. His friend, Don, has his own problems, and Henry feels badly about coming to him for support, showing again that Henry is not a selfish creature, but just a little off base. The Williams' adopted daughter, described as being abandoned with fetal alcohol syndrome, again shows the author's pain over the state of the Indian nations. Don helps Henry in his time of need, but can offer only money and food. The "irritable colon" of his friend is used by Henry later to explain his own bouts of health issues, but this is used only to conceal his true disease.

In chapter eight, Henry's own journey through the war is compared to the journey undertaken by Will and is found to be much different. Henry began by traveling the country. Unlike Will, who remained in love with the farm, Henry wants to see the United States he is going to be drafted to fight for. His journey leads him to the Southwest, where his love of the land is revealed to him. He does not choose military service as Will did, but is drafted. His father is angry, but Henry still sticks up for him, showing his respect for his father. It is clear, during the descriptions of Joe's rants, that Joe is not a stupid man, but is very opinionated about political issues. In the military, Henry enjoys the physical activity and the drills, and most of all, that he is good at something. However, like with everything else, Henry's own pride gets in the way. So eager to impress someone that he misses his shot, Henry shows again that it is his pride that often gets in the way of his good intentions. This is true throughout the novel. In addition, his pact with a friend to flee if called to fight shows a streak in Henry that even he finds shameful later in life. Henry often runs from battle in all areas of life, as opposed to fighting for what he believes in. He realizes, later, that he needs people, even though they rarely need him. This explains why, at the end of his life, he seeks those who accept him for who he is and does not just choose to die alone. Henry, for all his rants and quirks, needs other human beings to be happy with himself and his own life.

In chapter nine, Henry nurses the "irritable colon" of his friend to explain his now frequent bathroom stops, again foreshadowing the discovery of his terminal illness later in the novel. Henry's use of a bad credit card, one knows, will eventually catch up to him, but for now, he is able to live by using it. His discussion with the cashier about the newspaper shows he is irritable, and his lamentations about the cycle of the news

shows he is tired of the cycle of life, and the consistent state of the world. Then memory of Van Hoss foreshadows the following chapter about his house party.



Chapter 10, The Housewarming Party through Chapter 11, The Comforters

Chapter 10, The Housewarming Party through Chapter 11, The Comforters Summary

In chapter ten, Henry remembers March of 1956. He is in Village plaza, El Culito. There is an adobe church nearby, and in the middle of the land there is a long house with many doors, metal roofing, boarded up windows, and a store attached to one side. Henry arrives in his pickup with Myra, his first wife. He explains to Myra that this run-down building is their new home. He explains that the store will make a perfect studio for her art. Henry has brought the bed to the new "house", along with her books, wine and candles. Myra notes there is no stove, no gas heater, and no bathroom. Henry tells her she will have to use the outhouse. Henry explains that this is their introduction to voluntary simplicity. Myra is clearly uninterested, but the two make love, and Henry promises her things will be fine. Myra sets up her studio and begins working. Henry asks for a month, and promises her a nice housewarming party. He meets with the committee assigned to review his thesis, and he is told that he no longer has a future as a philosophy professor as he has taken three years and has nothing done on the thesis. Henry tells Myra he has a new job, on the highway department, and she is furious. Myra asks how she can explain this to her family. They begin to plan the party. Henry roasts a goat, buys champagne, beer, wine, imported cheese, and other goods. Soon, Willem van Hoss arrives as the first guest. He and Lightcap begin to drink, and van Hoss tells him to buy the property, as it will be worth something someday. The party rages on as more arrive, and the band begins to play. Goat is eaten, and the outhouse is set on fire. Drunken men and women begin to spill over outside, and pass out as van Hoss challenges women to have sex with him. Henry wakes up with a naked woman to find the house is on fire. He tries to find Myra, but discovers she has left with her friends. Henry has burned down the house he was charged with keeping, along with every outbuilding.

In chapter eleven, Henry reaches Albuquerque, but finds little he recognizes. He laments about the state of the landscape and the price of progress, as the landscape is torn and broken. He goes into a bar called Okie Joe's he knew from his youth, but finds it to be nothing but young, pompous college students now. He finds a fast food restaurant and sits to eat, but sees a man he knows outside. The man is a professor named Roggoway who used to fight racism with Henry by eating in white only restaurants. He was once nearly killed by a cook breaking a bottle over his head as he threw them out. Roggoway invites Henry to stay the night with him and his wife, Helen, and offers him employment, fighting the DOE and nuclear power and other environmental causes. Henry agrees to at least go back to the house. He stays the night and the following morning is back on the road to Santa Fe to see van Hoss.



Arriving at Santa Fe, he again laments the loss of beauty in the city. At the house of von Hoss, Henry is led by a maid to the hot tub, where van Hoss and Penelope, a lover, are sitting together, enjoying themselves. Henry is invited to join them, and the men talk of their lives. Hoss admits he now works with real estate and has made a fortune. They speak of Rogg, and van Hoss too offers Henry employment. The men and Penelope head down for a fine dinner and another young woman joins them. She is clearly a hired woman, but Valerie, as she is named, is beautiful. Henry does not take advantage of this opportunity. The following morning, Henry asks Hoss about a man named Bildad. Hoss notes he lives in exile with a band of gurus and mystics, and Hoss claims he is dangerous.

Henry leaves Hoss and continues on the road, remembering a time he and Myra argued about paintings he accidentally lost while driving. Henry is unable to immediately find Bildad and calls several friends, one of whom meets him for a beer and gives him directions to find Bildad in the desert. Driving into the middle of the desert, Henry begins seeking Bildad's camp. He sleeps, and wakes in the morning to continue his search. He finally finds him atop a high ridge, seemingly meditating. He is very thin and does not respond to Henry. On close inspection, Henry notes a hole in Bildad's head. He is smiling and looking into the distance. Henry pokes him, and the man falls over, clearly deceased. Henry speaks to him for many minutes about the nature of life, and leaves.

Chapter 10, The Housewarming Party through Chapter 11, The Comforters Analysis

In chapter ten, readers begin to understand Henry's idea of voluntary simplicity. Not wanting to live his life according to a clock or a job, Henry takes a job caretaking for a house/store in an impoverished area. He drags his wife Myra with him to a home without running water, toilets, a kitchen, or heat. He explains to her that freedom is simplicity, but she wishes to move back to New York. Henry sees no reason to complicate life with unnecessary things like running water. It is clear she does not want to be in this house, but Henry promises to make things better. Shortly, however, he loses his position as a teaching assistant and begins working for the highway department. To Myra, this is clearly a step down, in that he is now working manual labor. Myra is selfish and wants only for her own happiness to be complete, but she consistently relents and allows Henry a chance to improve. However, the housewarming party turns into a disaster as alcohol and women again cloud Henry's judgment. van Hoss is introduced as a cad and a sexual predator, but also as a shrewd businessman, foreshadowing his fortune later in the book. As Henry wakes to a naked woman and a burning home, it is clear that Henry's good intentions often lead to horrible disaster.

In chapter eleven, even more about Abbey's own politics are revealed. Three figures from Henry's past are presented in this chapter, all leading very different lives from those he recalls. Roggoway, once a fighter for equal rights, is still fighting, although now for environmental causes. This is Abbey's own passion, and the conversation between Roggoway and Henry in this chapter provides an enlightening look at Abbey's own convictions. van Hoss is again visited by Henry in this chapter. He is now a real estate



developer, playing on the idea developed in the previous chapter. van Hoss is a good friend to Henry, but also enjoys the good life. He finds men like Roggoway a threat to his way of life, as van Hoss wishes to build on land and Roggoway tries to save it. Finally, Bildad is introduced. Once a Henry's good friend, Bildad moved to the desert to lead a group of mystics. However, left to his own devices, he's obviously done something to trigger someone to killed him, as indicated by the bullet wound to his head. Henry still seeks his counsel, showing his own instability at this point. All three men are important in Henry's life, but all three vary greatly from Henry himself. Roggoway likes a good fight, but Henry retreats from confrontation. van Hoss likes a life of luxury, while Henry enjoys his voluntary simplicity. Bildad retreats into nature, and is perhaps the nearest to Henry himself. His apparent death, in conjunction with this similarity, foreshadows Henry's own upcoming demise.



Chapter 12, How Henry Found His Niche, through Chapter 13, Motel Room

Chapter 12, How Henry Found His Niche, through Chapter 13, Motel Room Summary

In chapter twelve, Henry becomes a park ranger after Myra leaves him to return to New York. He is determined to only work six months of the year, as park rangers do. He believes he has found his calling in life. Henry is interviewed by a man named Gibbs Pratt at Pratt's home. The two men drink while they talk, and Henry becomes rather intoxicated. Drunk, Henry leaves and drives through the man's stone retaining wall in his Park Ranger vehicle. A cow and calf are in the road, and Henry crashes while swerving to avoid them. Gibbs drives up, tells him his story sounds logical enough, and the two men begin cleaning up the wreckage, drinking the beer that didn't break in the crash. In October, he is let go for the end of the season.

He returns to New York because Myra has sent him a letter stating she is three months pregnant. Henry realizes they were last together six months ago, so the child cannot be his, but returns to Myra anyway. He arrives in New York, he and Myra make love, and she explains that the father of the child is a married man and that she expects Henry to play the father role. He tells her he may not be able to tolerate this plan, but she explains he has no choice. He begins working as a technical writer, but is soon fired. He goes to a bar and meets Bat Lanahan, who finds a new position for him with the New York Welfare Department. Henry is often late to his new job, and finds the constant stress almost intolerable. He manages several welfare cases, all of whom consistently call for more money or additional help. He tries to ask for help from others, but they too are busy with telephone calls. His supervisor reminds him that all of them are degenerates, and animals. Finally, one of Henry's clients demands to see him in person. Henry meets James Killoran in the lobby, who pesters him because the state has dropped his welfare check by \$12 a month. Henry finds himself nearly telling the man angrily to just kill himself, but eventually just tells him he will give him all the money he needs, so the man leaves. In February, Henry receives a letter noting his ranger job has reopened. Henry quits the Welfare position, tells Myra he is leaving, locates the truck he left parked down the street six months prior, and leaves New York. He plans to stop at Stump Creek on the way back to his ranger position to see his brother, Will. Henry receives divorce papers, and two weeks later, Myra announces her wedding plans.

In chapter thirteen, Henry and the dog are driving through a blizzard and are forced to stay in a hotel for the night, as camping is out of the question. The room is cheap and simple, but it has a heater. He and Solstice eat, and Henry begins pulling random auguries to find one that fits. He finds one about help from the hills, and thinks of home as he drifts to sleep. He wakes, cooks breakfast, packs the truck, and is back on the road. He describes the plains, the Canadian River, and wonders if he or the truck will



break down first. He cries. He drives through Clayton, and describes the modern, urban landscape. He thinks of Indians and of other pioneers who spent their lives trolling the land. He stops to urinate and hears meadowlarks. He camps for the night, cooks a steak, and hears a mourning dove in the distance. He thinks of a dove that called in Stump Hollow.

Chapter 12, How Henry Found His Niche, through Chapter 13, Motel Room Analysis

Chapter twelve explains the final ending of Myra and Henry's marriage. Henry finds his calling as a park ranger, which fits his idea of voluntary simplicity very well. His ranger work is only for six months a year, which he feels is plenty. He lives simply, without anything fancy, and chooses this for his happiness. His boss, too, knows the type of man that is good for such a job, and clearly understands that Henry is one of those men. Even after wrecking a company vehicle driving while intoxicated, he is given employment.

His wife, Myra, however, wants much more. When she finds herself pregnant by a married man, it is Henry she calls for. Myra constantly berates Henry and tells him he will not amount to anything, and yet it is him she looks to for help, because she knows Henry is kind and will try to please her, even in such horrible circumstances. When most men would have never even called her, knowing she was pregnant with another man's child, Henry at least tries to step up to the challenge. However, as always, Henry's good intentions get in the way of his life. When he offers to research a piece he is writing and is rebuffed, he completely loses interest and stops trying, and is therefore fired. His friends, found of course in the bar, find him employment, but it is clear that a free man like Henry cannot function in such a hopeless environment as the Welfare office. Faced with constant heartache and boxed into a small office, Henry begins to change. He becomes angry and uncaring, and knows this is not the place for him. When he is finally given a chance to return to his life as a ranger, he leaves the city and Myra. Henry is constantly called to the wilderness, as Abbey himself was, and his love is for the outdoors. It is clear Henry can only thrive with simplistic individuals who are happy just to exist in the wonder that is nature. Myra's quick wedding announcement shows she did not want Henry for love, but necessity, and that Henry was quickly replaced.

Chapter thirteen is primarily dedicated to the detailed description of the Midwestern plains. Abbey again flourishes in his depiction of a snow swept landscape, and his descriptions, while lengthy, put the reader into the situation. There are also several references to his health, again indicating there is something drastically wrong with Henry. Henry's random biblical searches show a need for hope, and a desire for comfort, which he clearly believes lies within Stump Creek, and his family.



Chapter 14, Death of the Old Man through Chapter 19, Kansas to Missouri

Chapter 14, Death of the Old Man through Chapter 19, Kansas to Missouri Summary

In chapter fourteen, Henry recalls the story of the death of his father. Will comes back from the war in 1945 and finds the farm in ruins. Will builds a cabin in the woods and laments the selling of the horses, the planting of alfalfa, and of fir trees. Through the war, he spent much of his time cutting trees and processing them in his own mill. Will particularly despises the coal strip the mining company has dug into the land, but Joe notes he was not able to stop them. Will marries, and begins working as a truck driver for the lumber company. For many years, Will and Joe hardly speak. One night, Lorraine calls Will because Joe has not come home from logging. Will comes to the house and notices a mourning dove's cry. He drives to the woods and finds Joe trapped under a fallen tree, the bottom half of his body crushed. Will levers the tree from Joe and carries him to his pickup. Joe, dying, asks Will for forgiveness, and Will forgives him. Joe dies from internal hemorrhaging on the way to the hospital. Will takes care of everything for the funeral, and the rest of the family, including Henry, flies home. Will hand carves a casket, and Lorraine insists he be buried at the church. Will and Bill Gatlin dig the grave and Will works on the wagon, as they will use that to transport the body. The funeral is held, and Will and Henry bring Joe in on the horse drawn wagon. The preacher discusses Joe's lack of religious faith. Henry recalls several memories of working with his father as a young child, being frightened when he could not see him through the tall crops. Henry looks at his family, mourning, and then he and the other pallbearers move the casket to the graveyard. Joe is lowered, and the family members each are given a moment with him. Henry makes a speech about the character of his father, but Will simply throws Joe's chainsaw into the grave. When the boys are filling in the grave, Henry asks why. Will notes he took all the parts he could use out of it, and didn't want to put in anything that was useful. They return home, where dinner is served. Lorraine tells the family she is moving into town and that Will has inherited the farm. Henry returns to the west.

In chapter fifteen, Henry is driving across Kansas. He takes a pain pill, and stops in a cemetery to camp. He dreams of Claire. In chapter sixteen, Henry continues to work as a ranger for fifteen years. He finds freedom in his simplistic life. He speaks to groups of individuals about the history of the land. At one campfire, a young woman asks if he is married. The two talk after his speech, and the woman stays behind, asking for a Band-Aid for a scrape on her calf. Her name is Claire Mellon, and Henry invites her to his trailer for food and drink. She accepts, but is cautious. At the trailer, the two talk, and Claire reveals she is nineteen. Henry is now forty-three. She lives in Denver and is visiting the forest with her mother. After careful conversation, Henry realizes he is already falling in love with the young woman. Henry is charmingly nervous. Claire rises



to leave, and Henry blurts out that they should make love. She admits she led him on but had wanted to see what he was like. She asks him to walk her to her camp and suggests that he visit her in Denver. He walks her back, she gives him her number, and they kiss goodbye. Henry walks to his trailer and thinks of Claire.

In chapter seventeen, Henry thinks about death. He notes that before he was born he was nothing, and he will be nothing again. He explains that the Christian alternative to nothingness, God, would be an eternal punishment, as would a disembodied soul. In light of these alternatives, Henry prefers the idea of simply becoming nothing. He passes through Dodge City, and notes it is the beginning of the East. He reads off more billboards and discusses the passing scenery of the business district. He stops at a park to feed the dog and put more oil in the leaking truck, and then gets back on the road. He passes through Pawnee Rock, noting the importance of the historic site, and then mentions it has been mostly destroyed by local builders. In Great Bend, he notices that, like Dodge City, the older parts of town are run down and vacant. He thinks of home.

In chapter eighteen, Henry recalls the women he was with as a young man. He recalls hearing Kennedy was shot, and many trips down the river, trips to Mexico, and the quad of Edinburgh University. He failed all of his courses as he visited Paris, Austria, and afterward, Cornwall, and then New York, where he met Myra within a week. He recalls working closely with Will as a boy, and remembers their bond.

In chapter nineteen, Henry drives through Kansas, describing the plains and farms. He stops at Cow Creek and tells of Coronado's stop there in 1541. He notices a lack of people in the small towns, and specifically, a lack of men. He wonders where they might be. He enters into Missouri and finds a dirt road that leads to an abandoned barn, where he camps for the night. He mentions again the pain in his stomach and thinks of Claire.

Chapter 14, Death of the Old Man through Chapter 19, Kansas to Missouri Analysis

Chapter fourteen is primarily dedicated to the death of Joe Lightcap, Henry's father. Will is shown again in this chapter to be dependable and hardworking, but also to be a bit bull headed. When he comes home to find his father is logging instead of farming, Will is angry and doesn't speak to his father for years as a result. He continues to help on the farm, but has little relation to his father. He continues to grow older and finds his own niche in life, but continues to care for the farm. When Joe is found by Will in the woods, it is clear Will loves his father and that his father, in turn, loves him as well. Will, left with little to assist with, manages to free his father from a fallen tree and carry him to the truck. His father's request for forgiveness clearly shows his love for his son, and Will's response that there is nothing to be sorry for shows his own maturity. Additionally, granting his forgiveness to a clearly dying man also shows his level of care and responsibility. It is Will who makes the casket, who makes the arrangements, who prepares the carriage, and does all the planning. At the grave site, Will's refusal to bury a good ax with his father again shows him not as a bad or cruel man, but a practical one who knows his father would prefer that he keep and use the good tools. As a result, it is



Will who is given the family farm. Henry knows he has no claim to the farm, nor does he desire it. Although he has special memories of his father, it is Will who has earned a right to the land.

By chapter fifteen, it is clear Henry has health problems. In this chapter, his pain pills are introduced, indicating a severe condition. Further, Claire is introduced in this and the following chapter. Chapter sixteen is the introduction to Henry's eventual second wife, Claire, who is twenty-four years his junior. Claire is an innocent young woman who seems interested in Henry and his voluntarily simplistic lifestyle. She is naive, but it is clear she is intelligent and caring. Although she and Henry do not have sexual relations, Henry's reactions indicate he is already beginning to have feelings for Claire. Her giving him her phone number foreshadows Henry's tracking of her later in the novel.

Henry's thoughts of death in chapter seventeen foreshadow again Henry's later revelations that he is dying. Interestingly enough, his discussion of the various forms of afterlife show readers he does not fear death, provided that death is actually an ending. He fears religious eternity more than nothingness. Several times in this chapter, Abbey again writes of the destruction of beauty in exchange for progress, and the poverty of the older areas of cities. In chapter eighteen, Henry's recollections of his various lovers show a side to him that is easy to forget while reading the novel. Henry is, at times, portrayed as a nervous, loving, caring individual who is almost bashful. In this chapter, however, readers are reminded that Henry is a womanizer and that he has a hard time committing to anyone or anything. Henry's recollections of his life show his failures as a lover, a student and a husband. In the end, however, it is the bond with his brother that he remembers as the strongest, and as something that continues to last. This again shows Henry's pride in his family ties.

Chapter nineteen is another discussion of nature, but Henry's notice of a lack of men also indicates a shift in this area from farming to factory work. In the end of this chapter the pain in his stomach is again mentioned, as is Claire, foreshadowing the revelation of Henry's cancer and the story of Claire.



Chapter 20, Henry in Love

Chapter 20, Henry in Love Summary

In chapter twenty, Henry calls Claire. He has been writing her letters. He is now in Denver and wishes to see her. She invites him to a concert in which she is playing. Henry is pleased. He watches, entranced, as she comes on stage and plays the violin with the orchestra. He meets Claire at the reception afterward and meets her mother, Grace. Grace and Henry walk outside and wait for Claire as Henry answers Grace's questions about his age and his intentions. Grace makes it very clear she finds Henry misdirected and someone she wishes her daughter not be involved with. Claire arrives, and Grace leaves the two alone. Claire and Henry walk together and talk of music as Henry puts his arm around her waist. She admits she didn't think he was serious, so she didn't answer his letters. He kisses her and asks to make love somewhere. Again, Claire refuses, noting that she couldn't stand to miss him afterward when he left. He walks her home, kissing her again as she walks inside.

He thinks only of Claire for several months, and calls often, but Grace tells him she is in Rhode Island. She also informs him she finds him dangerous, and wants him not to see Claire. He returns to Denver to see if Grace is lying, but he finds no trace of Claire. He writes her letters, and she finally agrees to meet him for a day in Glenwood Springs. Henry is humbly thrilled, and spends a day preparing. He drives to Glenwood Springs. He camps there, and the following morning he decides he will bring her to a wooded area for a picnic. He buys several expensive food items for their picnic, arrives at the station and cleans himself up again. When the train arrives, however, Claire is not on it. He leaves Glenwood heartbroken, gets drunk, and passes out in his truck on the way back to his cabin. The following day, he discovers Claire had sent word that she couldn't make the date, but headquarters could not reach him before he left. A week later she writes, apologizing again. She explains that she loves his letters and asks him to write. She explains that she is too young to have an affair with him. Henry writes her a week later, has affairs with women in town, but thinks only of Claire. He tries to call her collect, but Grace refuses the call. Claire writes, informing him she is leaving for Smith College in September. She wishes him the best. Henry takes a bus to Denver to surprise her, but when he arrives he is shy, unable to decide what to do. He gets drunk on the way, cleans up, and goes to her door but hears a man inside with her. It begins to rain. He leans on a nearby tree and is picked up by police. Under threats of arrest, he explains the situation to them. Not believing him, the police take him to the door and ask if the Mellons know him. Ten months later, Claire and Henry are married in a modest ceremony at the Grand Canyon. They make love under the starry skies and know they are in love.

They spend that summer at the Grand Canyon as Henry is working as a ranger. Claire works as a waitress, and Henry often goes to the bar with her at night, drinking half her tips. They would ride home together, eat, and make love. Claire does not return to school. The two discuss Henry's shortcomings, and Claire continues to love him for



them. In autumn, they travel the Southwest, seeing the desert, the canyons, and the rivers. Claire notes she fears their happiness, as it is too great and too constant. She believes they are too lucky.

Broke, they arrive in Tuscon, where Claire works as a waitress and tutor. Henry obtains part time employment, and they rent an apartment. Henry meets new friends at the bar, including Lacey, Harrington, Arriaga, and Hooligan. Claire lets him know she would like to have children. In January, Claire enrolls at the university, and Henry is angry she had to borrow from her mother. He takes a job as a security guard for a drug deal of Hooligan's. When he arrives home, Claire burns the money, explaining that she loves him and wants him to be safe. In May, Henry takes a job as ranger in Globe, Arizona. They celebrate their anniversary in June, and begin making love in an effort to conceive. One night, on the rocks in a thunderstorm, they make passionate love, and Claire is convinced she is pregnant.

Henry is hired as a game warden at Turkey Creek for twelve thousand dollars a year, plus expenses. Henry is given the position, and hires Lacey as a part-time assistant. On several occasions, Henry has to turn away potential hunters, and some become violent. Henry is soon told that the owners are restocking the land with cattle because they wish to keep their grazing permits. Henry nearly quits, as he believes the cattle ruin the land. Henry tells Claire, after making love while she is eight months pregnant, that he has to spend ten days at Turkey Creek. She decides to stay with him at the cabin. The fourth day, they travel by jeep over rough roads to a cabin on the ridge. She makes dinner and the two lay blissfully together, deciding baby names. He awakens to a scream; Claire's water has broken. She is delivering the baby a month early. Henry knows he will not reach a hospital in time, and together, they deliver the child. Henry has to cut Claire's vagina in order to open it enough for the baby to pass through, but does so expertly. He ties the cord, and happily gives the baby to Claire. Soon, however, he realizes Claire is still bleeding. He gets her into the truck to take her to a hospital, but the jeep slips over the side of a canyon and they crash. Henry is thrown from the vehicle, as is the baby, but Claire is trapped inside, crushed by the dash. Henry wakes, goes to her, and she smiles, noting she is tired of it snowing all the time. Claire dies from her injuries.

At the hospital, Grace arrives and accuses Henry of killing her on purpose for her money. She takes the baby to England and sues for custody, claiming Henry is mentally unstable. She wins, and Henry never sees Ellie, his daughter, again. Henry aimlessly leaves Denver after trying to see Ellie, and travels through blizzards to a small town in Utah. He rents a canoe and is gone for a month. He drifts aimlessly, attempting to heal his broken heart. He is sustained by the river alone, and by the wilderness that surrounds him. He returns to work as a fire spotter 9,500 feet above sea level and spends every day utterly alone. He repeats this cycle for seven seasons. He has several women, but none who remain or who he cares for. He hikes the Grand Canyon and lives in a variety of places as he serves as a ranger in several new towns and forests. He reads vast novels, and one day he challenges God to kill him. God does not answer, and Henry returns to the world. He meets Elaine.



Chapter 20, Henry in Love Analysis

Chapter twenty is the longest chapter in the book, and rightfully so. This chapter tells the entire story of Henry's horrible experience with true love, and with pain and suffering. Claire Mellon is introduced as a naive and innocent young woman who leads older Henry on for months. She is not a bad person, however, but simply young and foolish. Henry is shown to be awkwardly charming during his courting of Claire as he continuously worries about his appearance, his wording, his looks, and his position in life. Claire comes from a wealthy family, but does share interests with Henry such as music and books. They mesh well together. It is clear from the beginning, however, that Grace Mellon despises Henry. Grace sees him as beneath her and would love to forbid her daughter to see him. Grace's actions in the beginning of the chapter foreshadow her actions later when she gains custody of Ellie.

Henry's marriage to Claire is depicted as one of the most beautiful periods in Henry's life. For once, Henry is loved and accepted not only as an equal, but for who and what he is. Claire does not try to change Henry, as Myra did, but instead latches on to his ideas of voluntary simplicity and helps him achieve his goals. She too wants to live on her own, away from her mother, and wants, above all else, to be happy. The two are glorious together, and find new ways to love one another. Claire's comments about being too happy and too lucky foreshadow problems, however. It is clear Henry adores Claire and is so careful with her. When she is pregnant, he tries to keep her from harming herself consistently, and worries about her and the baby's safety. But it is Claire who pushes herself to the limit, and Henry, in love, allows it because he adores her. When the baby is delivered early, Henry originally baits God, telling him that the Lightcaps have won again against him. This foreshadows his next finding, that Claire is hemorrhaging. Henry's attempt to save her life results in her death, and both Grace Mellon and Henry believe the accident to be his fault.

Henry's escape from the world symbolizes his own escape from reality. Caught in a horrible cycle of pain that cannot be undone, Henry has no choice but to shut himself off. Unable to face the world, he disappears into the wild and into himself for several years. One can feel his pain as he isolates himself and treasures that isolation. In effect, he is preparing himself to reenter the world and to again face love and heartache. However, such a painful experience takes much preparation, and Henry is out of the world for nearly seven years. His string of women only masks his pain, and eventually, Henry allows himself to feel love again, as he finds Elaine. This chapter explains some of the fundamental problems within Henry. One can only imagine his pain and suffering, and although Henry was an alcoholic and a womanizer before this incident, it is easy to see that Claire's death and the loss of his baby to her mother have a profound effect on his life.

In addition, the healing of Henry through nature again shows Abbey's love for the natural landscape. Henry uses the land to nourish him, to feed and clothe and bathe him, and to save him. It is the land that he and Claire loved so deeply that allows Henry

to survive. The author uses nature as a comforting character throughout the novel, and in this chapter, this theme is particularly strong.



Chapter 21, To The Mississippi through A Postlude

Chapter 21, To The Mississippi through A Postlude Summary

Henry wakes in chapter twenty-one, eats breakfast, and notes that the pain in his stomach is more severe today. He continues to drive, and notices Solstice looks particularly bad, as well. He drinks more beer, twinging in pain in his pancreas. Henry drives until twilight and stops in Hannibal. He drinks several beers in a local bar, drives thirty more miles, and camps. He takes a ferry to Illinois and chats with the assistant ferryman, a young woman. He continues onward, arriving in St. Louis, lamenting about the state of conditions in the town. He stops in a state park and thinks of how Lewis and Clark would feel if they saw the city now. Henry realizes he doesn't feel well at all. He wonders if Will will be happy to see him and knows he brings with him his troubles, which he doesn't expect Will to care about. He mentions he is bringing his secret with him.

In chapter twenty-two, Henry and Will walk along a fence on the farm following the death of Claire. Will is a great shot with a .22. Willa and Henry discuss progress and Will's reluctance to join the modernization of the land. Will, too, has given up farming for logging, as his father did. They grow their own food, hay for the horses, and have enough syrup and other goods to trade for medical and dental help, when needed. He has a phone, due to the business, but no electricity. His heat is coal, and he has no inside plumbing. Will has cleaned the cabin for Henry to stay in. Henry is surprised to find man-made lakes and other man-made structures on nearby lands, and Will reminds him that is the price of modernization. They find tracks from an ATV near a broken spot of fence line. Will fixes the fence, and the two find two young boys a little into the woods. Will tells them to leave his property after breaking their shotgun. As they go back to the house, Henry notices that although the generation is different, the sights and sounds of the farm are the same when his father was alive.

In chapter twenty-three, Henry is five hundred miles from home. He tries to buy oil with his card, but it has finally been reported as overdrawn. He pays in cash, and pulls off to camp. His stomach is worse. He wakes, and drives on. He stops in a small town and calls Myra, who is now Mishkin-Miller. He asks her to run away with him, and she explains that it is too late for them. He buys beer and drinks, but is struck by immense pain in his stomach. He pulls over and vomits, along with having diarrhea. The fluid is pink and green, while his defecation is black. He passes out, only to waken with flies on his face. He buries it, and takes more pills. He continues to drive and attempts to drive through a small stream that has crossed the road, but the truck dies in the middle. Henry gives up and lays down in the truck, floating away, but the dog wakes him,



whining. He pulls her and himself across to the shore, but forgets his pills. On the shore, he waits for another vomiting episode to pass.

In chapter twenty-four, Henry remembers drinking with his friends one night, and being too drunk to go home. He stays with Hooligan, but wakes in the middle of the night with severe pain in his stomach. He vomits, shoving his head through a window and accidentally cutting his head. He is rushed to the hospital and run through a battery of tests. Elaine and his friends visit. Finally, his doctor reveals he has pancreatic cancer. He is given six to nine months to live. Henry asks that the doctor not tell anyone, as Henry does not want their pity.

In chapter twenty-five, Henry goes back to his sinking truck in the river to get his pills and bed roll. He also gets his guns. He and Solstice begin their long walk, although it is clear Solstice is dying. He is stopped by police, who give him a sandwich, and allow him to continue. A train engineer throws him a package of cigarettes with two left. He almost calls Will, but instead keeps walking, sickly, with the dog. He takes shelter under a bridge. The next morning, the dog refuses to move from the railroad tracks. Henry pulls out a gun to shoot her, but cannot. He puts her in the bedroll and carries her. They shelter in a tar paper shack that night, and he dreams of home. In his dream, he walks through his hometown, and it is the same as he remembers is at a child. He walks to the farm, but something dark looms over him. He pulls a gun on the blackness, preparing for its rage, and it overtakes him.

In chapter twenty-six, Henry continues to walk along the tracks. A young boy gives him a sandwich and a boiled egg. He comes to a farm, walks through the woods, and sees a cabin. The dog, left by the fence, begins to follow him. Henry takes a drink and four pills, watching the farmhouse through the trees. He sees Will come outside, trying to see what the dogs are barking about. He watches as Will cleans the rugs and Marian begins cooking a meal. Henry hears a mourning dove. Marcie, his sister, arrives with her husband and children. Will's son Joe and his wife and children also arrive. His mother also arrives, and Henry finds himself full of pride about his family. However, Henry also begins to feel as though he can't possibly go down to the house, and bring his troubles on his family. He decides to leave them alone, and continue to walk until he perishes. He hears a nearby motor, and the dog begins to growl. Rising to his feet, Henry turns to see Will coming toward him through the trees. Will tells him to come to the house, that they are waiting for him. Henry smiles and says he doesn't think he can stay. Will smiles in return and reminds him he doesn't have to stay, but that no one told him to leave, either.

In "A Postlude", Henry dreams of taking his daughter for a ride in a self-propelled old motorcar through the desert. He is expecting to be caught by police, but for the moment he is safe. He talks to the little girl of horses, and they plan a game where she sees lights in his eyes, and they travel full speed ahead into the desert, together.



Chapter 21, To The Mississippi through A Postlude Analysis

Chapter 21 begins to show the decline in health of Henry, as he mentions his pain more often. Additionally, his dying companions, the dog and the truck, have continued problems as well, symbolizing his own spiral downward. Again, nature plays a role in the novel as a character who is a constant companion to Henry. As Abbey speaks of Lewis and Clark and their likely hatred of the new landscape of America, it is again clear that Abbey despises the modern way of the world. Again, at the end of this chapter, Henry's mentioned "Secret" foreshadows the upcoming story of his diagnosis.

Chapter 22 focuses on Will's farm, and how the world is changing, but Will fights to remain the same. In his memory, Will and Henry are walking along the farm, and Will is using all the old means to repair things, such as barb wire and tape. Henry notices there are no modern conveniences and no modernization of the farm. It is so similar to the farm he knows as a boy that Henry is almost fooled into believing Will's son is Henry's own father. All around them are signs that the world is changing, including ATV's, young men with guns trespassing, and strip mines. Will, however, remains unchanged.

Henry's calling of Myra in Chapter 23 shows his own need to say goodbye to his past. Myra has been married several times, but she still accepts the call from Henry. Henry seems to need her to be angry with him so that he can move on. His illness is clearly worse, as his vomit and defecation increases. By now, readers gather he is dying. On several occasions during this chapter, Henry makes the decision to simply give up, but inside him, something still wishes to reach home. He and the dog continue to struggle on. When the truck finally gives up, this symbolizes again Henry's demise. It is Solstice who saves Henry by making sure he saves himself. However, in forgetting his pills, Henry simply becomes more ill.

In Chapter 24, readers are told, finally, what ails Henry. Throughout the novel, it has been clear that Henry is severely ill, and the realization that Henry is dying brings together the entire plot lines of the novel. Henry's journey to Stump Creek is his final journey home. His insistence on seeing friends along the way was his final chance to say goodbye. His consistent flashbacks are a way for him to remember his past one final time, and to relive his youth and his life, to savor his memories. The journey is not simply a journey home to see his family, but to accept his own immanent death. He and the dog are partners, in that both are dying. This is why he was unable to leave Solstice. Throughout his life, it has been family that has remained the only constant, and in death, it is that family he seeks.

Chapter 25 shows the blending of past and present for Henry. He is clearly almost home, as strangers begin to care for him as they do in small, rural areas in the East. He retrieves his pills, making his life less painful, but his dog's pills are gone. When she gives up, Henry is again unable to simply leave her. He carries her with him, although he can barely handle the weight, because she, like him, still wants to live. His shelter is meager, but his dreams are a converging of the town he knew as a child with his current



state, again symbolizing the merging in his mind of his old self and the new. His fight with the blackness in the dream symbolizes his fight with cancer, and in turning to face and fight it, Henry makes clear he is still fighting to win the battle against his illness long enough to get home. In the dream, the blackness overtakes him before he reaches Will, but readers hope he can, in reality, fight a little longer.

Chapter 26 is the final chapter of the novel. Again, strangers are caring for him on the way, and he knows he is nearing home. When he finally reaches the farmhouse, he watches as normal life continues for his family. The pride he feels in his loved ones is immense, and it is clear he loves them dearly. However, as he watches them in their happiness, he becomes aware that his own problems are not theirs, and that he cannot, in good consciousness, bring his problem to them. He is dying, and the people he is watching are very alive. Will, however, comes for him, showing again that Will and Henry are deeply connected. Will makes Henry aware that he is welcome to stay with them, and Henry feels joy within his heart, knowing he is finally home. The Postlude is simply a final dream of Henry's, as he and his daughter ride off together in the sunlight. In previous chapters, several discusses that Henry's eyes were windows to his soul, in that they showed hope and love and faith. In this case, the little girl looks into his eyes and sees dancing. Unfortunately, the reader knows this one last dream will remain unfulfilled, but in it, Henry is again blissfully happy.



Characters

Henry Lightcap

Henry Lightcap is a fifty-three years old womanizing alcoholic with pancreatic cancer. He is heading to his birthplace in Stump Creek, Virginia to see his family one last time before he dies. Through his journey, Henry examines his past to figure out his own personality. Henry is not a bad person, and he cares deeply for those around him. However, Henry's history with women is bad, to say the least, and he has had a string of bad luck and made bad decisions that have resulted in a lifetime of misery. Henry's first wife, Myra, wanted him to become something he opposed. When he wouldn't, she left and was impregnated by another. Henry tried to step up and be a father to the baby, but in the end, he couldn't be boxed into a city. He left Myra and met Claire, with whom he falls in love. He courts her, marries her, and the two are blissfully happy. However, following her death, Henry returns to his drunken, wayward life. After meandering for years, healing, he meets Elaine and marries her. But soon, her own past times and his begin to clash, and he again finds love in other women and alcohol.

Through Henry's descriptions of the world, it is clear Henry is neither a bad person, nor is he evil. Henry is simply a man whose alcohol abuse and love of women often lead him astray. When he is diagnosed with pancreatic cancer, he makes a choice not to tell those around him, because he does not want their love to come out of sympathy. Instead, he lets them leave and returns to his roots in Virginia. Returning home is, to Henry, the most important trip he can make, and shows his love for family.

Will Lightcap

Will Lightcap is the older brother of Henry. Will is a farmer in Stump Creek, the birthplace of Henry, and is idolized by his younger brother. Throughout his life, Will was the pride of his father and his mother. A good student, a good leader, and a loving son, Will consistently pleased his parents and showed responsibility in life. He served voluntarily in the military, and upon his return home, he married. Following the death of his father, Will and his wife inherit the family farm, and Will is able to do what he loves the most, which is working off the land. Will is balding now, with a slight paunch to his stomach, but he is still a powerful figure. It is clear throughout the novel that to Henry, Will is a father figure and a role model. Henry seeks Will whenever his life is going out of control, or when he needs someone to turn to. In the last of his days, it is Will he seeks out instead of the friends and women who have sustained him for years. Clearly, Will represents to Henry a stable force that can help him through his final days.

Claire Lightcap

Claire Lightcap is the second wife of Henry and the true love of his life. Claire meets Henry when he is a ranger in a national forest. On vacation, Claire attends his campfire



talk, and afterward, agrees to go back to his trailer for a drink. Once there, she admits she only wanted to see what Henry was like. The two do not have sex, but she gives him her phone number to call if he is ever in Denver. He writes her and then calls her when he arrives in Denver. He attends a concert in which she plays the violin. She is a small girl with chestnut hair and is decades younger than Henry. Following the concert, the two walk, and again, Henry is not given any sexual relation. He cannot stop thinking of her, and continuously writes her. She responds, but does not seem to be as interested. After several rebuffs, Henry arrives in Denver, unannounced, to visit. He is afraid to go to her but is stopped by police outside for suspicious behavior. He is brought to the door and wins Claire's heart. The two are married ten months later and live happily. Claire supports Henry's way of life and enjoys the freedom. They are blissful with one another, and for once, Henry is faithful. Claire becomes pregnant, and the two are thrilled. One night at a remote cabin, however, Claire delivers prematurely, and begins to hemorrhage. On the trip to the hospital, Henry crashes the truck, and Claire dies. Henry is affected for the rest of his life, tormented by the memory of his lost love.

Myra Lightcap

Myra Lightcap is Henry's first wife. Myra Mishkin was an artist, although Henry did not care for her art work. Once married, Henry moves Myra into a run-down abode that he and she are supposed to take care of. Myra hates it. Myra is upper class and tries to push Henry into becoming a professor. He tries to convince her that simple living is a more preferable existence. They consistently fight. When Henry and Myra throw a housewarming party, Henry finds himself drunk and with another woman and Myra leaves with friends. In the end, their house burns to the ground. They separate, and Myra mails him six months later, noting she is three months pregnant. When he arrives in New York, they make love, and she informs him that she wants him, her husband, to take responsibility for the child she is carrying, even though it is not his. Eventually, Henry is bullied into it. Myra's father is ill, but her family is powerful and gets Henry gainful employment. Henry becomes restless and leaves again, following the birth of the baby. Myra, like many women, sees potential in Henry but is disappointed when he does not achieve that potential.

Elaine Lightcap

Elaine Lightcap is the third wife of Henry. The book opens with Elaine leaving Henry in their home in Tuscon. He met Elaine as she walked past him with her father at a fair in Tuscon. Married for three years, Elaine finally tires of Henry's alcoholism and consistent inability to be the husband she wants him to be. Henry explains that Elaine went through several phases during their marriage, and that those phases were past of the problem. She learned gourmet cooking, but Henry hated most of her cooking that was not just meat and potatoes. Elaine let him know she never orgasmed, and the two tried to use several books to help, but eventually, Henry tires of trying, and wants to go back to making love. Elaine becomes partially feminist, and although Henry tries to be



supportive, he begins cheating on her. She, in turn, begins having an affair with a computer professor and leaves Henry to move in with him. She takes the last of the money in their account when she leaves. It is clear that although Henry cares for Elaine, he does not love her in the way he loved Claire.

Solstice

Solstice is the lovable family dog of Henry and Elaine. Solstice is dying of a disease known as valley fever. Valley fever is a lung fungus that is common disease in the southwest. Both dogs and humans can contract the disease, and many often die. She is given Nizoral, which will slow the progression of the disease, but she will still eventually die. Henry is originally planning to leave the dog with Elaine's house, but when the dog runs after him, he decides to take her as a companion. It is Solstice who provides Henry with a constant companion during his trip and who gives Henry a purpose to life throughout his journey. Solstice saves Henry when his truck becomes stuck in a flood and Henry falls asleep. Solstice wakes him and pushes him ever forward. When Solstice becomes too sick to walk, Henry carries her, rather than leave her behind, showing his close relationship with her. He can relate to her dying pain, as he himself is also dying a painful death. As such, Henry keeps Solstice throughout his journey, until the very end, when he rejoins his family at Stump Creek.

Grace Mellon

Grace Mellon is the mother of Claire Mellon, Henry's second and most beloved wife. Henry meets Grace as he tries to win her daughter over in Colorado, at a concert in which Claire is playing. Grace is composed, sarcastic, and clearly dislikes Henry from the beginning. Grace is cold to Henry, refusing him access to Claire on several occasions. When Henry is brought to Claire's door by police as he stand outside, debating whether to knock, Grace is clearly extremely unhappy. However, Claire and Grace still marry. When Claire is killed in an accident, Grace blames Henry. She takes Henry and Claire's new baby, Ellie. Grace has Henry declared incompetent, of low moral character, and financially unstable. She moves to Rhode Island, then Virginia, and Henry is never allowed to see his daughter again.

Keaton Lacey

Keaton Lacey is another friend Henry meets in the Dirty Shame Saloon in Tuscon while married to Claire. Lacey is mentioned throughout the novel, but little detail about her is given. Lacey has white hair and is an avid hunter. It is from Lacey that Henry first learns of the warden job at Turkey Creek Canyon. He is a Vietnam veteran who is fifty percent disabled, mentally. He is unstable, but it is Lacey who Henry hires as an assistant to help him at Turkey Creek Canyon. Lacey is good with his hands and helps Henry to revitalize the ranch at Turkey Creek. After Claire's death, Lacey eventually disappears to Mexico.



Daniel K. Decay Hooligan

Daniel Hooligan is another man Henry meets in the Dirty Shame Saloon while married to Claire. Hooligan is of questionable morals and makes money in drug deals and other illegal acts, in which Henry sometimes participates in order to make money. Hooligan visits Henry when he is hired as a warden for the Lovers of Fur Bearers in Turkey Creek Canyon. Hooligan is mere moments away as Claire's life slips away following the accident at the Canyon. It is also in Hooligan's house that Henry first becomes ill, and it is Hooligan who takes him to the emergency room. Throughout the book, it is clear that although Hooligan is a man whose life is questionable, he is still a dear friend to Henry, and one who cares for him.

Andrew Harrington

Andrew Harrington is an M.D., and a friend of Henry's. Henry met Harrington at the Dirty Shame Saloon in Tuscon, Arizona, while married to his second wife, Claire. Harrington is a kind man who cares for Henry, but he also tends to be an enabler for Henry's drinking problem. However, when Henry becomes ill, it is Harrington who gives a referral for help, and Harrington who is his consistent friend. When Elaine leaves, Henry calls Harrington for comfort.



Objects/Places

Stump Creek, West Virginia

Stump Creek, West Virginia is the birthplace of Henry Lightcap and the current home of Will Lightcap. Henry spends the novel driving across the country to return to Stump Creek.

Tuscon, Arizona

Tuscon, Arizona is the current home of Henry Lightcap and the setting in which the novel begins. Henry leaves Tuscon behind him to return to his roots in West Virginia.

Krauts

The word "kraut" is a derogatory term in the novel used to describe German soldiers in the war.

Juniper

Juniper is a bush that grows in the Southwest. Henry uses this plant as toilet paper in the novel.

Village Plaza, El Culito

Village Plaza, El Culito is the location Henry takes his first wife to live. The area is extremely run down and poor, but Henry secures a job as a caretaker for the area and moves him and his wife in.

Albuquerque, New Mexico

Albuquerque, New Mexico is a place Henry stops during his travels across the United States and where he meets an old friend, Roggoway.

Cow Creek

Cow Creek is another area Henry stops in during his trip. Cow Creek is the location Coronado stopped in during his search for Cibola, and where Coronado's priest, Padilla, returned to years later on a mission to Christianize the Indians. He became a martyr, and a statue was built in his image.



Turkey Creek Canyon

Turkey Creek Canyon is the location of Henry's job working for the Lovers of Fur Bearers as a warden. This is also the location where he and Claire live happily, and eventually, where Claire is killed in a car accident.

Rappites

Rappites are a group of individuals in New Harmony, Indiana. Between 1814 and 1825, this group was a community of celibate individuals dedicated to commonweal living. The group collapsed in 1825.

Pancreatic Cancer

Pancreatic cancer is a specific form of cancer that attacks the pancreas of the body. This form of cancer is inoperable, and incurable, and is the form from which Henry Lightcap is dying.



Themes

Destruction of the Landscape

As in many novels by Edward Abbey, the destruction of the landscape, and in particular, the Southwestern United States, is a primary theme throughout the novel. Abbey uses nature in this and other novels as almost a character, allowing the landscape to speak to the reader through the author's own descriptions. Abbey's descriptions of nature are often vast, and detailed to the point of becoming alive. In *The Fool's Progress*, the landscape directs the story. As Henry Lightcap moves across the country, each location reminds him of another time and place in his life and allows him to reminisce to the reader. This, in turn, allows the reader a deeper insight into Henry's past and into how that past is reflected in his present.

Clearly the landscape Henry sees now as he drives across the US is not the landscape of his youth, but has instead been horribly torn, destroyed, and ruined because of "progress". Abbey uses phrases like "blasted, obliterated, buried beneath the new America of black gummy asphalt and tinted glass and brushed sleek cool aluminum" (p. 211) to describe what Henry sees of Albuquerque, a city he used to love. "Enclosing everything is the smog," Henry notes on page 213. Henry is obviously displeased about the condition of his once beloved countryside. The "decayed and dying core of Dodge City" (p. 342) bothers him, as does the raping of the land by real estate developers, which he mentions throughout the book.

Abbey also uses descriptions of road signs blended with descriptions of beautiful landscapes in flashbacks to note his displeasure in the loss of beauty in the United States. When discussing his current drive, Henry notes the various billboards he sees as he nears certain towns. Those same towns, in his flashbacks, are filled with vivid descriptions of beauty and wonder. These changes show again Abbey's symbolic way of indicating his displeasure in the destruction of the landscape of his youth.

Voluntary Simplicity

The theme of voluntary simplicity is another mentioned by Abbey throughout the novel. Abbey explains the theory of voluntary simplicity as a cutting down of materialistic ideas and items to the point where freedom is absolute, because all things have become unnecessary. In the book, Henry first discusses this theory on page 103, as he describes an Apache hitchhiker he has picked up. Henry notes that the drunken man will either make it home or will sleep off his drunken state in a comfortable ditch. To Henry, this concept is one of voluntary simplicity, since the Indian man is simplifying his life and using the land in a way that is sustainable and conducive to a simple life. He speaks of it again when he is discussing with his first wife, Myra, the poor, run down abode he chooses to move them in when they begin their life in New Mexico. He reminds her, as she complains of the lack of a bathroom, heat, air conditioning,



windows, or other modern conveniences such as electricity and running water, that the true philosophers in life believe in the idea of living simply. He notes that to become rich, one can either sweat and work and never achieve anything, or one can simplify his or her life and enjoy it. He reminds Myra that simplicity means freedom. After Myra leaves him, Henry thinks again of voluntary simplicity and hopes she will eventually see that such a simplistic life can lead to self-reliance and independence. He believes liberty comes from living such a life. With Claire, he says the same thing, calling it voluntary poverty instead, and noting Thoreau also believed in such living.

Henry does not just preach about living simply, but spends most of his life living in voluntary poverty. Henry strongly believes in living off the land and in allowing the land to sustain him in return for his care of that same land. He cares for the land, and in return, uses that which the land provides for his sustenance. He does not ask for much, but spends much of his life in small shacks or living from his pickup. He chooses to live in the wilderness, and it is when Henry forgets this true faith that he finds himself in trouble. His marriage to Myra fails when he is forced to live in New York and obtain office employment. His marriage with Elaine fails when he works for another office and lives in a modern home. His marriage to Claire, on the other hand, is one of happiness and bliss, and it is because Claire allows Henry to live his simplistic life that he is so overjoyed. When she dies, it is again his simplistic life that allows him to find healing in the natural world around him, showing clearly that, at least for Henry, voluntary simplicity is a blessing.

Family Pride

Pride in the family is still another theme throughout *The Fool's Progress*. From the very first flashbacks, Henry Lightcap makes it clear he adored his brother, his father, and his entire family. His father, although outwardly angry that Will joins the military, talks highly of him to others, and remarks on his abilities to anyone who will listen. Henry himself recounts conversations with relatives asking about why they are proud, and his own response that being a Lightcap is the only reason they need. They are proud of their roots and proud of their heritage. Henry is proud of his half Shawnee heritage and even more proud that such a heritage involves a medicine man named Doctor Jim. When Henry sets off to tour the country at an early age, his father again shows pride, as he does when Henry later joins the military. When Henry's wife Claire becomes pregnant, Henry notes her sense of pride in her family. At the end of the novel, as Henry lies dying outside Will's home, he feels pride as he watches his brother and his brother's children. He feels another stab of pride as he watches his aging mother move gracefully. It is this very pride in family that drives Henry home in the first place, but it also nearly stops him from seeing his family before he dies. Although Henry is proud of his family, he also doesn't want to shatter that pride by imposing on them. It is Will who goes to Henry, and it is Will who ensures Henry is able to be amidst the family he prides during his death.



Style

Point of View

The point of view of the novel is first person. This point of view is important, since the story is primarily about one man's journey through life and through the process of death. As such, this point of view allows the reader insight into the thoughts and motivations of the main character that would otherwise not be possible if the novel were told in the third person. This allows a more in-depth look into the life of the character. In addition, the emotional roller coasters Henry faces throughout the novel are made more real and more potent because of this first person point of view. Since another theme of the novel is the role of nature in the life and experiences of Henry, this viewpoint is also important. It allows the reader to see through the eyes of Henry, and his descriptions of the world around him are made more vivid and alive than would be the case with third person narrative. The story is told through a combination of present day descriptions and situations and flashbacks from the earlier life of Henry. This method is used to allow the reader to understand the motivations and drives of the main character, and helps to keep the story flowing. Henry spends much of the novel by himself or with his ill dog. During these times, the reader would be unable to see inside the mind of Henry to understand how the landscape is associated to his own life without the use of first person narrative. Finally, the use of constant flashbacks would be difficult to follow if not told from a consistent first person viewpoint.

Setting

The novel is set in the United States and stretches from Tuscon, Arizona to Stump Creek, West Virginia. Through the flashbacks in the novel, however, and as the novel follows Henry's travels across the country, many other places are visited. Henry begins life in Stump Creek, West Virginia. As a young man, he travels across the US but ends up being drafted. He joins the military and is stationed in Italy for a short time. He returns home to the United States. Many of the flashbacks in the novel take place in national forests, as Henry worked as a part-time ranger for many years. These areas range from the deserts of Utah and Arizona to the forests of Colorado, Utah, New Mexico, and Montana. For a time, he and his first wife live in New Mexico. Following a brief separation, they live in New York. Henry leaves New York, however, to move to Mexico. He returns to the United States and meets Claire. They meet in Denver, eventually marry, and move to North Rim, Utah, and Tuscon, Arizona. They eventually settle in Turkey Creek Canyon, Arizona, where Claire dies. Henry moves around the country then, but eventually moves back to Tuscon and marries Elaine. When he discovers he has cancer, he moves from Tuscon and heads across the country back to Stump Creek.



Language and Meaning

The language of the novel is extremely informal most of the time, particularly in areas of dialog. Henry is not a formal man, although he is highly intelligent, and his dialogs are often high brow but not difficult to comprehend. The sentences are structured in an informal manner as well, with some sentences containing little or no punctuation as Henry's thoughts are simply places on paper in their original form, without formatting. This style is easy to read, and helps the reader understand the mind of the main character. In addition, during descriptive passages, the language of the novel tends to be extremely descriptive in nature. Abbey uses as many adjectives as possible to describe his surroundings in a way that allows the reader not only to see the beauty of nature, but to see it through the eyes of the character, and to relate that natural setting to the inner workings of Henry's mind. The switch back and forth between the past and the present throughout the novel is helped by the simplistic nature of the writing, as well. These long descriptive passages can, however, be lengthy at times, and can become somewhat confusing as the author changes time periods.

Structure

The novel is comprised of twenty-six chapters, each of which is of unequal length. Each chapter is named in relation to the time frame or event that occurs within the chapter, foreshadowing what the reader is about to experience. The chapters switch between the current time period and flashbacks, making the novel difficult to follow at times, since the flashbacks are not presented in chronological order. This odd structure of the novel is difficult to understand but helps to serve the primary point of the novel, which is to have a deeper understanding of the life and motivations of the main character, Henry Lightcap. Henry has experienced many bad relationships, with many women having abused him or left him, but much of this treatment was deserved. He is an alcoholic who has a big heart and who is genuinely a kind man, but one with little motivation for greatness. When he finds out he is dying, he crosses the country to return to his roots in West Virginia. Throughout his journey, he is reminded of events that make him who he is. The pace of the novel is slow but steady. It is simple to read, although the long descriptive passages can be a bit tedious. The story is non-linear, forcing the reader to often look backward to find an appropriate time line, but this approach simply adds to the disorganized image of Henry.



Quotes

"The natural right of self slaughter. Always a viable option, a good working alternative. No other animal on earth enjoys so free a choice. No one has a right to complain about life because no one is compelled to endure it."

Chap. 1, p. 7

"P.S. I'll be coming alone, as you might expect. Just me and my fleas.... I'm alright, it's the world that's dysfunctional and I mean that literally."

Chap. 3, p. 69

"Well, that's true. That's the simple truth, Raymond. The only thing the Lightcaps had to be proud about is that they were - and still are - and always will be! - Lightcaps. That's all we got."

Chap. 6, p. 133

"The draft was like a well-organized cattle drive, with this difference: most cattle have brains enough to attempt to resist, to escape. But not humans. It's not that we lacked the courage or intelligence to resist: we lacked the means to resist. And they will."

Chap. 8, p. 154

"Voluntary simplicity, Myra. Many professors of philosophy but no philosophers.... There's two ways to be rich: (1) sweat and scheme and grovel for money and never get it anyhow; or (2) live the simple life. Sit down."

Chap. 10, p. 181

"Trying hard to work up a twinge of nostalgia. Hard work, for the city that I loved has disappeared. Like the America of my boyhood and youth it's been blasted, obliterated, buried beneath the new America of black gummy asphalt and tinted glass and brushed sleek cool aluminum."

Chap. 11, p. 211

"The important thing, I think ... is to avoid succumbing to cynicism—to that weary resignation which passes, in the decadent West, for wisdom and wit."

Chap. 12, p. 249

"He himself would carry out a private one-man revolution in the belly of the beast. Freedom begins between the ears. The Good Life starts where servitude ends. In a nation of sheep one brave man is a majority."

Chap. 16, p. 330

"I'm a philosophy major. Well, a second lieutenant. That's why I'm totally confused. ask me a question, I think of sixteen possible answers, all false. The result is kind of infantile paralysis."

Chap. 16, p. 333



"Claire's eyes were open and Henry thought that she was looking for him. He crawled closer until he could reach and grasp her dangling hand. It still seemed warm though he felt no pulse of blood in her palm. He thought she was smiling".

Chap. 20, p. 430

"Wrong attitude? What do you mean, wrong attitude? First you tell me I've got a cancer in my ... pancreas gland, now you tell me I've got the wrong attitude in my ... eyes? Is that fair? I ask you."

Chap. 24, p. 482

"Nobody said you had to stay, you ... fool.... And nobody ever said you had to leave, neither."

Chap. 26, p. 509



Topics for Discussion

Edward Abbey uses a vast amount of description in the novel related to nature and the world around the character, Henry Lightcap. Why do you think Abbey uses nature almost as a character? What purpose does this serve? What are Abbey's goals in this? Is he successful? Why or why not?

Henry is a womanizer and often cheats on his wives. Does learning about Claire change how you view Henry in regard to his treatment of women? Why or why not? Did he cheat on Claire? Why or why not? Do you think Claire's death has any relation on his treatment of women later in life? Why or why not?

Myra, Henry's first wife, leaves him and is impregnated by another man. She then asks Henry to take responsibility for the baby and for her, which he tries to do. In the end, Henry is unable to remain faithful to Myra, and leaves her and her unborn child. Do you believe Henry is to blame for this situation, or do you think Myra was unfair to ask Henry to accept responsibility? Why? What options did Henry have, other than to accept her and her child? Would that have been fair to Myra? Why?

Compare and contrast the characters of Henry Lightcap and Will Lightcap. How are they the same? How are they different? What do those differences mean in terms of how their lives are led? What do their similarities mean in terms of how they approach life?

Claire dies in a car accident in the novel, and her mother, Grace, blames Henry for her death. Explain the circumstances under which Claire was killed. Do you believe this is Henry's fault? Why or why not? What are the reasons Grace believes Henry is to blame? Are her reasons just? Why or why not?

Henry decides not to tell his third wife, Elaine, of his pancreatic cancer. He tells his doctor he doesn't want under her love under those terms. What does he mean by this statement? Do you think his decision is fair to his wife? Why or why not? Do you think she would have left him had she known? Why or why not?

Describe Joe Lightcap in detail, and compare him to Henry. Do you think they are alike or similar? Why or why not? Do you believe Joe was more proud of Henry, or of Will? Why? Describe Henry's relationship with his father. What ramifications, if any, do you think his relationship had on his life? Why?