

The Fortress of Solitude Study Guide

The Fortress of Solitude

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Plot Summary

NOTE: Citations in this study guide specifically refer to the September 2004 First Vintage Contemporaries Paperback Edition of *The Fortress of Solitude* by Jonathan Lethem.

The Fortress of Solitude is an historical novel by Jonathan Lethem which recounts the childhood and growing up of white kid Dylan Ebdus and black kid Mingus Rude in Brooklyn through the 1970s. When the novel begins, Isabel Vendle, an incredibly wealthy white woman, moves onto Dean Street, where she begins to buy buildings, fix them up, and to encourage white families to move into the area in order to restore the neighborhood. Among the first white families to move to the area are Abraham and Rachel Ebdus along with their son, Dylan.

Dylan is unconcerned being around so many black kids at first, though he does quickly grow tired of everyone calling him “white boy.” Rachel herself is not happy with the new location, believing there is a world beyond Dean Street, while her husband and son come to look at Dean Street as the extent of the world. Rachel begins fighting with Abraham and abandons the family. Before she does, she predicts that Dylan will become best friends with the new kid next door.

The new kid next door is Mingus Rude, the mixed-race son of famous has-been black soul singer, Barrett Rude, Junior, of the group *The Distinctions*. Dylan and Mingus quickly become friends over their mutual love of comic books. They come to spend all their free time together, either in defending their street against threats like Robert Woolfolk, a black kid from another street, or playing ball with the other kids on Dean. As the boys grow, they encounter a homeless man and drug-addict who says he can fly, and who Abraham sends to rehab out of kindness. The man gives Dylan a small silver pinky ring which he claims gives him the power to fly. As time passes, Dylan and Mingus use the ring to pretend they know how to fly and to take on the persona of Dylan’s invented superhero, Aeroman.

As both boys move into their teenage years, Mingus begins using marijuana, then coaxes Dylan into using it as well. Through their teenage years, they get high frequently, while Mingus disappears for weeks at a time (his disappearances are never explained). Dylan does his best to stay on top of his academics and is placed into an elite high school as a result. At the age of eighteen, Dylan comes to realize that his life and Mingus’s life are on different paths. When Mingus’s grandfather confronts him and his father about their drug use with a gun, Mingus shoots and kills his grandfather and goes to jail.

Dylan heads off to school at Camden, Vermont, where he is kicked out for drug use; and then transfers to Berkeley in California, where after graduating, he becomes a music journalist. There, through his late thirties, he dates a girl named Abby and meets up with his father, now a famous science fiction novel cover artist, in Anaheim. From Abraham,



Dylan learns that Mingus has given up one of his kidneys to save his father's life. Dylan decides it is time to return to the old neighborhood.

Dylan misses his childhood deeply. He sees that Dean Street has changed in many ways – it has been updated, cleaned, and so on – but in many ways, it remains the same. Drugs and crime are still rampant, and many of the kids who grew up there are still there. Dylan heads upstate to visit Mingus in prison, and while they are friendly, it is clear they are not really friends anymore. As Dylan drives home, he stops at the University of Indiana where he visits with Croft, the nephew of Isabel, who reveals it was he who ran off with Rachel so many years before. He has not seen her since. Dylan realizes his mother ran away from what she believed to be a regular human life, while Dylan himself longs to return to his childhood.

Part 1, Chapters 1 - 6

Summary

Part 1: Underberg

Part 1, Chapter 1 – Dean Street in Brooklyn, formerly white, is now fully minority, so when white people begin to move back in – such as old Isabel Vendle and the young Solver family with their daughters Thea and Ana – it is a surprise to everyone. When white six year-old Dylan Ebdus learns from his mother that a little girl wants to play with him, he thinks it may be a Solver sister, but instead it is an older black girl named Marilla. Dylan tells Marilla that his father is an artist and is making a movie, while Marilla says she wants to go and buy some candy. Dylan realizes his mother has set him up on a play-date. Isabel, meanwhile, has been researching her Dutch ancestry and her family's connections to the neighborhoods in the area. She intends to restore the neighborhood to its former glory, and the Ebduses are among the first recruits. Dylan has two worlds in this place – an indoor world (his home, his mother Rachel, and his father Abraham), and an outdoor world on the street.

Rachel, who grew up playing on the streets, wants her son to do the same so she always sends him out to play. At one end of Dean Street is Nevins Street, while at the other end is Bond Street. The children of Dean tend to play in the middle. Among them are black nine year-old Henry and his younger brother, Earl. They like to play wall ball, stickball, stoopball, and touch with Davey and Alberto from across the street, along with the other kids in the neighborhood. Isabel and Rachel visit with one another while Isabel's building is being worked on. Isabel encourages Rachel to send Dylan to a good, private school, while Rachel wants Dylan to attend public school like she did. Isabel worries that Dylan will be in school with kids who do not want to learn. Rachel believes this is a problem Dylan himself must solve.

Part 1, Chapter 2 – Skully is a game that Dylan comes to learn to play. Skully is a street game that involves the drawing of a game board of squares on the sidewalk, and in which bottle caps and similar objects are flicked into the drawn squares. The Solver family suddenly moves away. Dylan attends P.S. 38, and looks forward to getting home each day to be with the other kids on the block. Dylan is very bored with school and his teacher, Miss Poobner. Meanwhile, Isabel looks forward to the film on which Abraham is working, for it is to be a film about the changing nature of the Boerum Hill neighborhood, of which Dean Street is a part. Robert Woolfolk, a kid from Nevins Street, begins hanging around Dean. Henry and Robert come to fight over Robert's last name being made fun of, but the other kids break the fight up. Although Henry has lost the fight, he makes it seem like he is the winner. At school, Dylan notices more and more Chinese kids attending class, diversifying the school even more.

Part 1, Chapter 3 – Now ten and in fourth grade, Dylan works for Isabel for a dollar an hour doing different household chores and errands. Isabel is known now as



Vendlemachine by Rachel, who gives nicknames to everyone. Dylan's father's nickname is The Collector. Dylan does not like working for Isabel and wants to quit. Instead, Isabel sends him out to pick up milk, Kraft American slices, and English Muffins from Buggy's store. On the way, Dylan is confronted by Robert Woolfolk. Robert tells Dylan if he comes around with the old lady's money again, he might have to take it off Dylan. Isabel's nephew, Croft, comes to visit her. He meets Rachel and Dylan when Dylan goes to quit his job at Isabel's. They discover Croft loves comic books. Rachel does as well. Rachel oversees Dylan quitting, which amuses Croft because he says he would run away from a scary old lady, too.

Later, Robert demands to try out Dylan's bike. He says he will only ride it around the block, but he never brings it back. Abraham finds it thrown into a vacant lot along with piles of trash. He brings it home to Dylan. Marilla and La-La are playing outside of Dylan's house one day, and they tell Dylan that Robert has said he did not take Dylan's bike and that if Dylan says so, Robert will fuck him up. After Halloween, Henry explains that Dylan's mom made Robert cry. Dylan has had no idea of this. Henry asserts that Dylan's mother is crazy.

Part 1, Chapter 4 – It is August, 1974. Richard Nixon resigns from the Presidency of the United States. Rachel brings Dylan over to Pintchik, a heavily-white part of Brooklyn. She does this to stretch their legs, for she is upset with Abraham for thinking they live in a little box no bigger than their street. Rachel reveals that a new neighbor, Barrett Rude Junior, former singer for The Distinctions, has moved in next door with his son, Mingus. Rachel believes Dylan and Mingus will be best friends. Mingus and Dylan discover a mutual love of comic books. Mingus is friendly and very willing to share the details of his life with Dylan, including everything from afro picks to his father's gold records to the fact his mother is white, divorced, and demanded a million dollars in exchange for custody of Mingus. Mingus begins to call Dylan "Dillinger" after 1930s criminal John Dillinger, because of his name. Isabel, meanwhile, has been staying at the hospital. Rachel and Croft visit her daily. After another fight with Abraham, Rachel leaves.

Part 1, Chapter 5 – Abraham accepts the fact that his wife is not coming back, and so moves to sell the nude paintings he has made of her to Erlan Hagopian, an Upper East Side Armenian-American collector. One December day, Dylan sees graffiti markings that Mingus has made – his tag, he explains, which spell out "Dose." During a football game, Barrett sends Mingus and Dylan out to get some bread and sandwich meats. Dylan notes how rough Barrett can be with Mingus, even to the point of hitting Mingus for the slightest offenses, such as betting five dollars on the football game. Dylan and Mingus take to the streets in the spring, trying to decode tags and following trails of graffiti. Abraham goes to visit his old teacher, Perry Kandel, at City College. Kandel has a job for Abraham in which a series of science fiction novels need cover illustrations. Abraham accepts the job.

Part 1, Chapter 6 – Dylan continues reading comic books, and enters sixth grade. There, he is picked on for being white and he comes to be known only as "white boy." Dylan begins wearing Pro Ked 69er shoes. He also begins receiving unsigned Running Crab postcards from Bloomington, Indiana. Dylan wonders if they are from his mother.



Mingus takes to wearing a military-style jacket, Dylan and Mingus go to visit Brooklyn Heights, a very wealthy area. Surprisingly, even on the Brooklyn Heights Promenade, Mingus and Dylan find tags. Mingus comes to mark DOSE for himself. It is explained that tags are like communication—a call to those who hear. Mingus urges Dylan to create his own tag, and suggests Dill Three or D-Lone because Dillinger is too long.

Meanwhile, Mingus has begun referring to his father as Barrett rather than “Dad.” Mingus smokes weed and offers Dylan some, but Dylan turns it down. Mingus explains his mother kicked his father out for doing drugs. At home, the mail brings the first of the books Abraham has illustrated a cover for. Dylan reads the book and tells his father it is not bad. While out looking to tag on his own, Dylan runs into a vagrant black man who has fallen down and who says he used to fly. The flying man asks Dylan for a dollar, which Dylan gives him. The flying man has a silver ring, which seems to be his source of power.

Analysis

Author Jonathan Lethem is clear in pointing out that friendships vary early on in his novel *The Fortress of Solitude*. Friendships involve people who may not look alike, may not act or speak alike, and may not even have anything in common. Nevertheless, friendship is still possible. This is exemplified by the friendship between Dylan, a white kid, and Mingus, a black kid, both growing up on primarily-black Dean Street. Despite their different skin colors and the racial tensions of the time, the two boys find they have much in common, such as a mutual love of comic books. Their blooming friendship should be noted as having been predicted by Rachel Ebdus, who herself cannot reconcile her differences with her husband, and so leaves town.

The setting of Dean Street plays a significant role in the plot of the novel. Rachel is unhappy with the idea that Dean Street means so much to her husband and her son. She insists there is a world beyond Dean Street, while Abraham, Dylan, Mingus, and others refuse to do so. The reader should note that whenever Rachel has business beyond Dean Street, or merely chooses to get away from Dean Street, she brings Dylan with her to force him to experience something beyond Dean Street. An important symbol presented here relates to Abraham’s film, which is directly about and influenced by Dean Street. At the same time, Mingus and Dylan both come to see Dean Street as their entire world – a place to play ball with friends and to confront strangers and bullies like Robert Woolfolk. Lethem effectively argues a timeless urban truth – that the street is one’s entire world.

It becomes clear as well early on that racism exists among people of all races. Initially, the reader is introduced to sassy, old-world, and old-moneyed Isabel Vendle, who plans to restore the neighborhood of her ancestors to its former glory. This means selling and renting to only whites. Isabel’s racism is contrasted immediately with the racist expectations of other minorities who live on the block, who are surprised to see white people moving back in and find the white people to be out of place. Likewise, Dylan is frequently referred to as “white boy,” a term of racial endearment to some, but a racist



taunt by others. Yet, as the reader will note, the racism that surrounds Dylan is made tenable by Dylan's friendship with Mingus. Mingus himself could care less that Dylan is white.

Despite growing up on the same street under very similar conditions, as they approach their teenage years, Dylan and Mingus begin to travel down different paths. This underscores Lethem's theme that two people growing up in the same place under the same circumstances can still turn out differently. While Dylan appears focused on school and academics besides his friendship with Mingus, Mingus himself begins smoking marijuana. Although Dylan will later come to do drugs heavily, at first he refrains from participating. In large part, this is because drugs are an accepted aspect of the culture of the streets among blacks; Dylan is not black and so does not have the same sociocultural expectations to live up to. Mingus also comes to begin tagging – marking his call-sign, or nickname – on anything from trash cans and lampposts to building facades in pursuit of living up to the expectations of black urban culture. Note that it is Mingus who introduces Dylan to tagging, while other black kids in the neighborhood could care less if Dylan tags anything or not. This is emblematic not only of the different paths lives can take, but is proof that things will change in time.

Discussion Question 1

Why does Isabel Vendle want to restore the neighborhood to which she has moved? Do you believe Vendle's actions display a racist attitude? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 2

What sorts of racism does Dylan experience as a rare white kid in a heavily-black neighborhood? Why is Dylan the recipient of such racism?

Discussion Question 3

Despite being white and black, Dylan and Mingus still become best friends. Why is this so? How do cultural expectations begin to create a gap between them? Why do they let this happen?

Vocabulary

queasy, insoluble, philosophical, heretical, skully, fluent, cavorted, expunged, proximity, objectionable, spontaneously, quizzically, elongated, translucency, conjured, reverently, retrenchment, gentrification, non sequitur, laconically, renunciation, exhorting, polyrhythm, charlatan, cantilevered



Part 1, Chapters 7 - 13

Summary

Part 1, Chapter 7 – Another postcard comes in, dated August 16, 1976 and featuring a picture of Henry Miller. Meanwhile, Barrett has begun snorting cocaine. He calls Mingus in to give him Ray Charles tickets. Mingus leaves while Barrett passes out from his high. On September 7, Dylan begins seventh grade at I.S. 293. In the schoolyard, Dylan meets a redheaded boy named Arthur Lomb who pretends to be having an asthma attack, which keeps others away. Apart from Dylan and Arthur, there are only three other white kids at the school, all of whom are girls. Arthur and Dylan begin talking in the library, during which time Arthur reveals himself to be sexually obsessed with Farrah Fawcett and that he loves comics. Dylan knows they will become friends.

Part 1, Chapter 8 – Dylan rings Mingus's doorbell in the morning before school, causing Barrett to come to do the door and tell Dylan to never ring his doorbell so early and that he will see Mingus at school. Mingus, however, seems to disappear for a while, reappearing at school. He puts some money in Dylan's hand and asks Dylan to buy him cigarettes. Dylan realizes Mingus must be high. Mingus brings Dylan along to meet up with Robert Woolfolk at a park. Mingus and Robert have apparently become good friends suddenly, which startles Dylan. A blond woman approaches to ask Dylan if he is okay, for he is surrounded by black kids. Dylan explains he is among friends. Mingus heads off, not wanting to deal with the blond woman's questions. Dylan realizes the woman must be racist. Dylan goes to visit Arthur's place over on Pacific Street between Hoyt and Bond Street. As time passes, Dylan becomes better friends with Arthur, coming to hang out with him regularly. Dylan comes to see that Arthur struggles to stay on top of current fashions and struggles to try to look popular, even if he is not. Abraham, meanwhile, travels uptown to meet with Belmont publishers regarding book covers, while Barrett brings a new track to a record company.

Part 1, Chapter 9 – As spring emerges, Isabel, now dead, has left the work of restoring the area up to investors and renovators. More and more white families are now moving in. The area becomes a patchwork of white, Italian, black, and Puerto Rican enclaves. As Dylan and Mingus continue their friendship and continue tagging, the differences between them increase. Mingus tags the flying man's rear-end while he appears passed out. One night, after a lecture by experimental filmmaker Stan Brakhage, Abraham comes to question why the word DOSE appears on so many of Dylan's belongings. He sees DOSE tags appear elsewhere, and tells Dylan it is wrong to disrespect people and their property by tagging. Abraham blames himself for making Dylan live on Dean Street. Suddenly, Abraham realizes that he and Dylan have been conversing above a homeless man – the flying man – sleeping on the street. Abraham checks the man into a hospital at Fort Greene Park. The man's wallet identifies him as Aaron X. Doily of Columbus, Ohio. The man gives Dylan his silver pinky ring. Mingus assembles the Dean Street Crew, consisting of him, Dylan, Lonnie, and Alberto, in order to steal paint from McCrory's, a Woolworth's knockoff. While the three black boys grab spray paint



and leave it around the store at various places, Dylan comes along to steal it, because it is believed no one will stop or suspect a white boy of theft.

Part 1, Chapter 10 – The summer 1977 begins. Aaron Doily, who has gone through drug rehabilitation, is bound for Syracuse with some of Abraham's old clothes. In Syracuse, Aaron will live in a Salvation Army shelter, attend Alcoholics Anonymous meetings, and continue to get his life together. Abraham plans to send Dylan away to camp in Vermont for the summer, or to do the Fresh Air Kids program, to get him out of the city and away from its bad influences. Barrett, meanwhile, appears poised for a songwriting comeback but he continues to descend further into drugs. Dylan finally introduces Arthur to Mingus. They begin a game of stoopball that comes to attract others to play. Many of the other teens question Mingus about the wealthy-looking visitors his father has had. Mingus refuses to talk about this. Dylan comes to consider his friends: the drug-using Mingus, the criminal-minded Robert, and the okay Arthur. Dylan realizes it is all cool. A throwdown, meanwhile, is set for the schoolyard of P.S. 38, hosted by Grandmaster DJ Flowers. What everyone comes to call the Jam of '77 happens right before a blackout.

Part 1, Chapter 11 – Dylan comes to develop a crush on a pretty blond girl named Heather Windle while he is away from the city at the Fresh Air Kids program. He is staying with her family. Heather has a troublemaking brother named Buzz who likes to shoplift everything from Penthouse magazines to shotgun shells. Dylan turns thirteen in August. He shares his first kiss with Heather. While swimming, she allows him to feel her breasts. Dylan shows off the superhero-like costume he has made for his alter ego, Aeroman. Heather does not like the costume, and it ruins the romance between them.

Part 1, Chapter 12 – Barrett and Mingus attend church at the Parlor of God, with Reverend Pauletta Gib presiding. Pauletta compliments Barrett on his singing, and Barrett says he wants Mingus to know God. Pauletta asks Barrett to sing at church but Barrett does not know if he will. Samuel J. Underberg's Inc. Food Store Outfitters is known for the graffiti on the side of the building, and as a gathering place for local teens despite its unremarkable nature as a large food store where household items, like spray paint, can be purchased. Dylan, Mingus, and Arthur grab paint from the store and head out to meet up with others in their crew. The night before the summer ends and eighth grade begins, Dylan, Mingus, and Arthur head to tag an abandoned police truck at the foot of Brooklyn Bridge. Dylan, dressed as Aeroman, decides to follow a white woman to see where she goes but then heads off to meet up at the truck when the woman runs off in fear. There, Mingus and Arthur have gathered with Robert and are eating pizza. At a record store on the way home from school a few days later, Dylan comes across an old Distinctions album, featuring Barrett on the cover. Dylan buys the record but discovers at home that it cannot be played because it is scratched. As the school year gets underway, Arthur seems to be tending toward trouble while Mingus will disappear for weeks at a time. Abraham wins a Hugo Award for Best New Artist. Abraham gives the award to his son for a doorstep.

Part 1, Chapter 13 – It is now February, 1978. Barrett's new song can be heard on the radio and winds up at number eighty-four on the R and B charts. Then, like many songs, it simply disappears. At school, Mr. Winegar asks Dylan to stay after class. Dylan has



performed exceptionally well on placement testing, giving him the chance to attend Stuyvesant rather than some ordinary public high school. Meanwhile, Mingus gets Dylan to begin using marijuana and to tell him about Heather. Dylan lies and tells Mingus that Heather gave him a blowjob. One night, Dylan heads out as Aeroman and races around to scare off two black kids who are about to beat up a white kid.

Analysis

The author continues to explore the theme of varied friendships in this section of the novel. This can be seen through the characters of Dylan and Mingus and their continuing friendship, but the theme also continues through Arthur's character. Though from another block, Dylan's bringing Arthur to hang out with everyone on Dean is Dylan's way of vouching for him and ensuring that he, too, has friends. Arthur, like Dylan, has a love of comic books. Despite his being white, Mingus accepts Arthur because Dylan has vouched for him, and because race is clearly not an issue for Mingus. While Arthur is indeed the victim of racism at school – which is why he has fake asthma attacks – he experiences no such racism from Mingus, to Mingus's credit. However, Arthur's friendship with Mingus will eventually come to have serious consequences for Arthur.

The creation and development of Aeroman serves as a symbolic motif in *The Fortress of Solitude*. Aeroman, as the reader will recall, is born from a combination of a love of comic books and the receipt of Doily's ring which he claims makes him able to fly. The silver ring itself comes to symbolize the joys and possibilities of childhood. The imagination of Dylan allows him to believe he can fly as Aeroman, and he begins trekking around in the Aeroman costume. Childhood has a powerful hold on a human life, as Lethem argues here – and such is the case of Dylan as Aeroman, who wants to do good, fight evil, and be like his heroes in the comic books. Dylan does not stop to think what a powerful hold his own childhood imagination has over him – but this is in direct contrast to a new path he is beginning. His imaginative innocence is confronted by the realities of the social and cultural realities of Dean Street, in which drugs and tagging become requirements. There is a disconnect between the childhood Dylan wants to exist in and the reality of the childhood that Dylan has.

As such, two people who grow up in the same place under the same circumstances can still turn out differently – or can become one in the same. Dylan is slowly being culled by the lure of the streets, while Arthur far more quickly succumbs to activities like tagging. However, Dylan remains committed to his academics – which pays off in terms of education. The reader should note that Dylan's scores on standardized tests elevate him above his peers, and these test results earmark him for placement in a special school, should Dylan choose to go this route. Mingus had the same chances as Dylan to do well academically, but Mingus chooses a different route. Mingus descends further and further into drug use, shadowing the decline of his father.

Just as the fantasy world of Dylan's childhood is contrasted with the realities of Dean Street, so too are Dylan's good grades contrasted with Mingus's use of marijuana.



Using marijuana, participating in tagging, and stealing spray paint all symbolize a loss of childhood innocence on Dylan's part. On one hand, Dylan is struggling to enjoy the innocence of childhood, while on the other hand he is struggling to live up to the expectations of the street – and his friends. Still, Dylan holds onto his childhood as much as he can despite the changing times, such as the scene when he, as Aeroman, stops two black kids from beating up a white kid while stealing spray paint cans. There is, again, a clear disconnect between the intentions of childhood to do good and the realities of life on Dean Street, where doing bad is considered cool.

Discussion Question 1

Why is Arthur accepted so quickly among the kids of Dean Street? Is it because of a lack of racism or because Dylan has vouched for him, or perhaps something else entirely? Explain.

Discussion Question 2

Describe the juxtaposition between the do-gooding of Aeroman and the criminal activities expected of Dylan among his friends on the street. What accounts for this disconnect? Why does Dylan seem caught between his life as Dylan and his life as Aeroman?

Discussion Question 3

As Dylan and Mingus grow, they begin to move down different paths. What things do they still share in common? Where do they diverge? Why?

Vocabulary

pondering, bestowal, allusion, compensatory, craven, machinations, glottal, ennui, airily, implication, absolution, conglomeration, monolith, ironically, pantomime, peremptorily, instantaneous, deadpanned, perihelion, delinquent, malicious, ostentatious, stupefied, elaborate, dandyish, mimicry



Part 1, Chapter 14 - Part 2, Liner Note

Summary

Part 1, Chapter 14 – It is July, 1978. Barrett's father, Barrett Senior, meets with the police about the drug use going on in his son's house. The police don't want to hear it, as a written complaint against Barrett's father exists over his harassing three girls at 1:00 a.m. on Pacific Street. Senior insists it is not good what is going on in the house, and that eventually, he and his son will come to blows if nothing is done. When Dylan begins school at Stuyvesant, he becomes friends with Gabriel Stern and Timothy Vandertooh, both friendly and nerdy kids. Gabe and Tim live on Roosevelt Island, while Dylan continues to come and go on Dean Street. Mingus begins to drink beer regularly and begins hanging out with Arthur often as Dylan's time at Stuyvesant means he is at home less. Mingus also begins taking on the role of Aeroman, and between him and Dylan, several sightings of Aeroman are reported through the fall. As the winter approaches, Gabe and Tim begin listening to punk music and dressing punk. As the spring of 1979 gets underway, yet another Running Crab postcard arrives.

Part 1, Chapter 15 – Abraham spends his days working on his film and painting book covers. Mingus awakens and listens to music, and he and Abraham always wave hello to one another outside and sometimes chat. Both men are influenced by their lives on Dean Street. The May 16 edition of the newspaper carries a story about Aeroman mistakenly attacking a plainclothes police officer on a drug sting, with Aeroman being identified as Mingus Rude, age sixteen, and noting that no charges are pressed against Mingus for the mistake. With the newspaper in hand, Dylan goes out looking for Mingus. Dylan cannot find him. As he wanders around, he is confronted by two black teens that mock him for being white before continuing on. Dylan is getting tired of being racially identified. At last, Dylan catches up with Mingus at Mingus's house. There, he smokes marijuana with Mingus and Arthur, and asks about the newspaper incident. It is now November, 1979. Everyone realizes the 1970s are almost history.

Part 1, Chapter 16 – Barrett invites some of his friends and some girls to come over to get high and hang out on the day of Mingus's birthday. Mingus is told he is a man now, and offered lines of cocaine and a girl named Yolanda. Mingus does not want any of this, as his grandfather is in the house. Barrett later calls up to tell Horatio he has seen someone named Chapman looking at his house, and that he has enemies and needs help.

Part 1, Chapter 17 – In the early 1980s, dropping acid becomes common among Dylan's friends. Dylan and Linus Millberg are given the money from everyone attending a party for the band of friends to go and buy acid from a gay guy on Ninth Street. Among those present is Liza Gawcet, a girl Dylan likes. Liza and some of her friends come along on the acid run. The purchase is interrupted by Robert and his friend who want to rob everyone, but they stop when they realize who they will be robbing from. The gay acid seller, Tom, tells Dylan, Liza, and the others to get out. As time passes,



Dylan sees how quickly the neighborhood can change, especially as he gets older. He takes a minimum wage job at a local Haagen-Dazs ice cream parlor. A short time later, word gets out about the word DOSE being tagged on a jail tower cell, which stuns everyone because no one knows how such a place could have been tagged. It is considered the most epic tag ever. To Dylan, it is a betrayal because he believes it to be a message of some kind.

Part 1, Chapter 18 – Having graduated high school, the summer has rushed by and Dylan is preparing to head off to college in Camden in six weeks. Arthur comes in to visit Dylan while he is working at Haagen-Dazs. Arthur is looking to make some money, so he wants to sell his comic books. A plan dawns in Dylan's mind, so Dylan agrees to come by and take a look at the comics. Dylan offers one hundred and fifty dollars for everything, and asks what Arthur needs the money for. Arthur explains that he is going in on a kilo of cocaine with Mingus and Robert through one of Barrett's connections. Dylan asks if Arthur thinks Mingus might be interested in selling his comics, and Arthur agrees to pass the thought along to Mingus. A short time later, Dylan goes to see Mingus. Robert Woolfolk is also present. Dylan offers one hundred and fifty dollars for Mingus's comics. Mingus accepts, and Dylan casually tosses the cash down. Dylan intends this to seem casual and symbolic of the fact that he is no longer of that place.

Mingus walks Dylan out, and Dylan tells Mingus to call him when Arthur and Robert are not around. When they are not, Dylan goes to see Mingus, who is sleeping the day away in stupor. Dylan offers money to Mingus for the cocaine kilo in exchange for the return of the flying man's silver ring, which Mingus has long had in his possession after borrowing the Aeroman costume. Dylan and Mingus believe the ring gives them the power to fly. While Mingus gets the ring, Barrett asks to talk to Dylan. Barrett is wasted away from drugs and alcohol, and appears old and haggard. Mingus returns the ring to Dylan only after Dylan has snorted some coke. Barrett's father, Senior, arrives with a gun to confront his son over his immorality. Mingus urges Dylan from the house quickly, protecting him from what is about to happen. Out on the sidewalk, Dylan hears a gunshot.

Part 2: Liner Note – Part 2 takes the form of an article written by Dylan about Barrett Rude, Junior, and his work with The Distinctions. Dylan relates that Barrett was born in 1938 in Raleigh, North Carolina, to a troubled marriage. Barrett's father was an occasionally-employed pastor who was stripped of his pastorship. Dylan relates that in the 1960s, Barrett recorded two singles at Mitchell's Hi Records Studio, though it is not known how he came to the studio's attention; and that he was also the harmonizing singer for The Distinctions right at the time 1960s soul music came into its own. However, Dylan explains, through the 1970s, Barrett could not make the cut alone after breaking from The Distinctions due to creative disagreements. Dylan reveals that on August 16, 1981, Barrett Senior arrived at Barrett Junior's home with a gun and that Mingus shot Senior to death. Dylan relates that, though Barrett Junior is still alive, he never went public with anything again. Dylan relates that the voices of people like Barrett compel people back to their past, to the streets and neighborhoods left behind, all to be bothered blue like The Distinctions song says.



Analysis

Lethem's thematic argument that two people growing up under the same circumstances may diverge in paths continues in this section of the novel. This is very clear between Dylan and Mingus. The drug use between Mingus and his father has grown so bad that Mingus's grandfather actually goes to the police. The reader should note that Barrett Senior's assertion that they will come to blows should not be ignored as mere rhetoric. This ominous language foreshadows what will very soon come to pass: Senior confronts Junior and Mingus with a gun. Mingus pulls out his own gun and shoots his grandfather to death. Mingus's ordering of Dylan out of the house moments before the shooting is a clear indication that Mingus is not only protecting Dylan from what is to come, but it is also another step away from the friendship between them.

Despite their common use of drugs, Mingus and Dylan do indeed grow apart through high school – partially as a result of attending separate schools, but also because Mingus is growing deeper and more embedded with street culture. People once considered enemies are now close friends, such as Robert Woolfolk – a friendship borne of street expectations and street culture. Despite the damage drugs are doing to Mingus and his father, Dylan himself continues to use drugs as well. However, Dylan comes to recognize that there is little left in the way of friendship between him, Mingus, and Arthur. The reader should note the symbolic scene in which Dylan throws money down to purchase Mingus's comics – a symbolic act in which Dylan demonstrates he no longer belongs to Dean Street, and that childhood is over.

The throwing down of the money is heavily symbolic not only because it symbolizes the end of childhood and the end of friendship, but especially because it symbolizes that Dylan no longer belongs to Dean Street. He has paid his dues, he has paid with his time, and now he is moving on. This demolishes the conception that the neighborhood—the street—is one's entire world. Dylan, in many ways, repeats his mother's leaving of Dean Street, though Dylan's departure is honorable and for positive reasons (the reader will later learn that Rachel left because she did not want an ordinary American existence, and so turned her back on her husband and son to indulge selfish ends). Dean Street is no longer Dylan's world. Dylan's world ultimately becomes college and writing articles about music, evidenced by the Liner Note article of Part 2. Part 2 acts as a transition for the reader which bridges the gap between Dylan's childhood and Dylan's adulthood some twenty years later.

Discussion Question 1

Despite seeing the damage that drug use can involve – especially with respect to Mingus, his father, and his grandfather – Dylan continues to use drugs, even despite his path to college being clear. Why is this so?



Discussion Question 2

Why does Dylan decide to purchase the comics owned by Arthur and by Mingus? What is signified by Dylan's payment, and how he delivers the money to Mingus? Why does this matter so much?

Discussion Question 3

Despite growing up under similar circumstances and in the same place, Dylan and Mingus are utterly different at the age of eighteen. How are they different? Why are they different?

Vocabulary

counternatural, falsetto, enigma, punk, self-loathing, flamboyant, mortifications, edict, braying, beguiling, superficial, indubitably, communes, bewildered, precocious, demoralizing, morass, munificent, spurious, asymmetrical, cataclysm, guffawed, montage, itinerant, fervor, arcane



Part 3: Chapters 1 - 7

Summary

Part 3: Prisonaires

Part 3, Chapter 1 – Dylan now begins narrating the novel from a first-person perspective. He is now working as a music reviewer and living in Berkeley, while seeing a black girl named Abigail “Abby” Ponders, but the relationship appears stale. Dylan tells her he will be headed to Anaheim to have dinner with his father, who is to be a guest of honor at ForbiddenCon, a science fiction convention. Abby is angered that Dylan did not think to tell her sooner. She also confronts Dylan about his love of depressing music by black artists and about a small display he has of things from the past, such as the ring, one of Mingus’s afro picks, a pair of Rachel’s earrings, and a book of black-and-white photographs inscribed “For D. from E.” She demands to know why Dylan is obsessed with his childhood. Dylan says it is because his childhood was the only part of his life not overwhelmed by his childhood. Abby tells Dylan to clean up his room.

Part 3, Chapter 2 – It is September, 1999. Dylan heads to a meeting with Jared Ortham set up by Randolph “Randy” Treadwell at L.A. Weekly. Dylan pitches a movie idea to Jared about the black singing group The Prisonaires who were big in the 1950s and came from a Tennessee prison. Dylan reveals the lead Prisonaire to be Johnny Bragg, in jail for trumped-up charges of rape. Dylan reveals that when the Prisonaires became famous, a liberal attitude was applied wherein they were used as models of prison rehabilitation, and their potential release sparked a political and social firestorm. Dylan says that the Prisonaires were finally released, but Johnny was arrested once more as a setup for robbery and sexual harassment against white women. Jared is floored by the idea for the film and wants the weekend to consider it. He leaves the room and tells Dylan to call his agent. Dylan does not have an agent so he calls Randy Treadwell but Randy has no thoughts to offer. Jared returns to the room. Dylan thinks it is possible that Johnny Bragg might still be alive. Jared is worried that Johnny may not want his life story told, but he is willing to see the project through into a film.

Part 3, Chapter 3 – Dylan meets his father, Abraham, at the Anaheim Marriott, along with Abraham’s girlfriend, Francesca. They will later be having dinner with Zelmo Swift, who is the committee chair, a businessman, and a lawyer. Abraham, since 1989, has converted his brownstone building on Dean Street into a duplex, and remains there working on his film and renting out one half. Dylan attends a panel in which his father is a part, and in which his artwork is discussed. Sidney Blumlein, one of the panelists, applauds not only Abraham’s paintings but his filmmaking as well.

Part 3, Chapter 4 – Dylan, Abraham, and Francesca head to Bongiorno’s for dinner with Zelmo and his date, Leslie Cunningham. Zelmo explains that ForbiddenCon is his way of giving back, that it is the classiest of conventions, and that it elevates the science



fiction world besides being a reference to the film *Forbidden Planet*. At dinner, Abraham brings up the subject of Barrett Rude, Junior, Mingus's father. Abraham reveals that Barrett's kidneys failed, and that Mingus, serving time in a prison upstate, was released to a hospital temporarily to donate a kidney to Barrett. Mingus is now back in prison. This news is stunning to Dylan. In his hotel room, Dylan cannot help but think of Mingus and his childhood on Dean Street. The next morning, Abraham shows off select portions of his films, periods including 1979-81, and 1998. Dylan finds the film beautiful and it reminds him of his childhood. Before leaving, Francesca and Zelmo give Dylan some typed pages with information found about Rachel, revealing she was in trouble with the law several times through the late 1970s for things like theft and forgery, and that her last verifiable address was Bloomington, Indiana, 44605. It is explained that Francesca thought Dylan had a right to know. Dylan tells Zelmo not to bother Abraham with such information.

Part 3, Chapter 5 – Back in Berkeley, Dylan heads to Shaman's Brigadoon on San Pablo Avenue, a cultural hotspot for black musicians. As a music journalist, Dylan is always waved in, free of charge. There, he always flirts with a blond surfer girl named Katha. Katha invites Dylan to party with her and her friends. Dylan goes with Katha to her friend Deirdre's house. There, Deirdre, Jane, and Katha do lines of cocaine. Dylan also does two lines. They then go to Katha's house and do more lines of cocaine. Many other people are also there. Dylan urges Katha to play an original song on her guitar, which she agrees to do. Her song is about drugs. Dylan then listens to a street kid throw out some raps he says he and his homeboy have come up with. Katha and Dylan then smoke marijuana. Dylan and Katha begin to have sex, but Dylan cannot focus because of the drugs. Katha then makes herself orgasm by masturbation, and encourages Dylan to masturbate onto her breasts. In the morning, Dylan packs his bags and books a flight to the East Coast.

Part 3, Chapter 6 – Dylan reflects on heading to college at Camden in Vermont long after his Fresh Air Fund Kid days with Heather Windle, including parties, his friendship with his roommate Matthew, and using his life in Brooklyn to manipulate his wealthy, liberal college counterparts. Dylan recalls the school itself turned a blind eye to drug use, even to the point of drugs being done out in the open. Dylan also recalls spending much of his time in college doing drugs. Dylan remembers taking the ring into the woods near the school and flying, even though he did not have the costume anymore. He also remembers one day receiving a call from Arthur Lomb.

Part 3, Chapter 7 – Dylan recalls Arthur explaining that Mingus was arrested, convicted of manslaughter, and sentenced to prison in Elmira, thus ruining the cocaine deal and leading to Robert and his buddies threatening Arthur's life. Dylan recalls convincing Arthur to come up to the college to sell the cocaine in order to get Robert back his money. Dylan remembers Arthur's visit also being one of tagging the campus and being caught doing and dealing drugs by the cleaning staff, which was in turn directly reported to the college. Dylan recalls how the college had no choice but to suspend him for one term, bring him before a hearing of the student council, and suspend his scholarship due to his failing grades.



Analysis

Following the liner note, Dylan takes over the telling of the narrative himself. This is important for two reasons: First, Dylan's life now exists independently of his friendship with Mingus and his story is entirely his own. Second, Mingus is in jail, Dylan has fallen out of touch with him, and little is now known about Mingus. Just as there has been a transition in Dylan's life from Dean Street and childhood to adulthood in California, so too has there been a transition in the physical structure of the novel by way of the narration. Dylan now lives in California and works as a music journalist while dating a black girl named Abby. With Dylan being a successful writer, and Mingus being in jail, Lethem's assertion that two people who grow up in the same place under the same circumstances can still turn out differently is demonstrated to be entirely accurate.

Despite there being a marked break between childhood and adulthood, it is clear as well that childhood still continues to have a powerful hold on Dylan. Abby challenges Dylan on why he keeps a small shrine dedicated to his childhood, while Dylan responds that "My childhood is the only part of my life that wasn't, uh, overwhelmed by my childhood (Part 3, Chapter 1, p. 317)." In other words, childhood was a generally wonderful time for Dylan when anything was possible, when being an adult didn't matter, and when Dylan could simply live life for the sake of living life. There were not adult responsibilities the way that there are now for him. Dylan looks back on childhood with nostalgia, remembering it as better than it actually was; and adulthood pales in comparison. In other words, Dylan simply cannot let the past go because childhood had such a hold on him, and still does.

This is especially true not only because it is a time to which Dylan knows he cannot go back, but because of changes in life. Changes in life often lead people to think back about stable, safer times, and for Dylan, those times were in his childhood. Changes are all around Dylan now, and he responds accordingly. Now in California and working – while still indulging in drugs – Dylan dates a black girl, keeps a shrine full of childhood mementos, and cannot help but reflect on childhood at large. He is growing older, heading toward forty, and is very aware of how things are different. For example, Abraham has become successful beyond imagining, is dating a younger woman, and seems to be very happy with life.

This is in sharp contrast to Abraham's struggles in the past. Seeing his father reminds Dylan of the past, both in terms of memory, and in terms of the information his father brings up about Mingus having to donate a kidney to Barrett, Junior. Dylan has something of an identity crisis as he becomes tangled in the past: he cheats on Abby, does more drugs, and decides to return to Dean Street. His decision to return to Dean Street is a physical manifestation of his mental and emotional journey into the past – and as Dylan travels back to Dean Street, he retraces the steps of his life between leaving Dean Street at age eighteen, and his present life.



Discussion Question 1

Why does Dylan keep what Abby calls a shrine to his childhood? What does this shrine consist of? What does this have to say about Dylan and his life as an adult?

Discussion Question 2

Dylan's use of drugs, cheating on Abby, and deciding to visit New York on a split-second's notice are emblematic of Dylan suffering a crisis. What is this crisis? What has brought this crisis on? Why does Dylan engage in such juvenile and risky behavior?

Discussion Question 3

Why does Dylan decide to return to Dean Street? What is this process like for him in terms of returning to the past? Why has Dylan been so affected by the past at large?

Vocabulary

peevish, fugue, pitch, avuncular, titillated, cadged, phantasmic, self-abnegating, audible, pronouncement, populist, ironized, sublimating, talismanic



Part 3, Chapters 8 - 16

Summary

Part 3, Chapter 8 – Dylan recalls that, despite his issues with Camden, U.C. Berkeley was still willing to bring him in, so he transferred schools. While there, Dylan remembers getting involved in DJing for KALX, the campus radio station. Dylan remembers coming to call himself “Running Crab,” a reference to his mother’s own move west after leaving New York. Dylan also recalls playing forgotten albums, revamping the station’s gazette, and going on to write for the local paper, Alameda Harbinger. Dylan also remembers attempting to fly in Berkeley, but being unable to do so. Dylan realizes he has grown up.

Part 3, Chapter 9 - Dylan remembers doing his best to retain his neighborhood roots by visiting heavily-black places that were almost anti-white, including Bosun’s Locker on Shattuck Avenue near Sixtieth Street. Dylan recalls meeting and befriending a black man who called himself OJJJ (for his name, Orthan Jamaal, Jonas Jackson), and within minutes, OJJJ getting into a fight with someone else and getting shot while Dylan took OJJJ’s gun and fled. Dylan remembers learning that OJJJ survived, and that Dylan was being named as a suspect in the newspaper accounts. Dylan recalls calling the Oakland Tribune to explain the situation, referring to himself as Aeroman attempting to do a good deed.

Part 3, Chapter 10 – In the present, Dylan arrives at Berlin Restaurant on the corner of Smith and Baltic, where coffee is served by Euclid Barnes, an old friend of Dylan’s from college. Dylan has invited Arthur to visit Mingus in prison in Watertown with him, but Arthur has refused, saying he visited Mingus in June. Instead, Arthur will be meeting up with Dylan and the two plan to visit Mingus’s father. Arthur is foul-mouthed and owns a few buildings, but he still has the same desperate-to-fit-in feel as when they were younger. Dylan has also been out through the old neighborhood not only to visit his father and Francesca, but to see the old sights and sounds with Arthur. Much of it has been refreshed. Marilla still lives on the block; Alberto has become a policeman; and Henry is now an assistant DA. After meeting up with Arthur, Dylan and Arthur drop in on Barrett, Junior. He is happy to see them. Dylan gives Barrett some CD versions of his old records, but these do not interest Barrett. He is not thrilled to talk about Mingus being in jail. Outside, Arthur explains that talking about Mingus always shuts Barrett down, and that Robert Woolfolk is also in prison in Watertown.

Part 3, Chapter 11 – Dylan heads to Watertown to the prison to see Mingus. Mingus is thrilled to see Dylan, and is amazed to see him after so much time has passed. Dylan is likewise amazed to see Mingus after so much time has passed. He notes that Mingus resembles his father, has sickly yellow eyes, but still remains the Mingus he knew years before. Dylan also reflects on how he, Mingus, and Arthur are all approaching forty, and none of them are married. Mingus confirms that Robert is in prison. Dylan then pulls out the flying ring, saying it belongs to Mingus now. Mingus tells him to put the ring away.



On the way out, Dylan puts money from Arthur into Mingus's commissary account, and then puts two hundred dollars into Robert Woolfolk's commissary account.

Part 3, Chapter 12 – Dylan spends the night at a motel in Watertown. He decides to wear the ring once more, and to assume the role of Aeroman one last time. He goes sneaking around the prison, and gets to look at Mingus's file. His psychological evaluation describes him as apprehensive – the exact opposite of what Dylan remembers of Mingus on Dean Street. Dylan later speaks with Abby by phone. Instead of being able to say something meaningful to her, he tells her that the Four Tops never broke up because they were all Jewish.

Part 3, Chapter 13 – While Dylan and Barrett look at Dean Street with a kind of romance, for Mingus it is an island against the rest of the city. Mingus can trace his own life by places, from Dean Street to Spofford Juvenile to Riker's Island to Elmira to Elmira Career to Watertown. Mingus thinks back to his childhood and thinks of flying. He has never glanced at the sky, and remembers flying as being a whim within a summer, and knows there is no reason to think of it at all.

Part 3, Chapter 14 – Mingus reflects on the year of freedom between Elmira and Watertown and how he drifted around the old neighborhood, slept at an abandoned pool on Thompson, and got high. Mingus remembers how Arthur attempted to help set him straight by getting him a job with Glenray Schurz, a woodworking and furniture company, and then installing Windsor Weather Stripping. Mingus also remembers how he was in and out of addiction recovery groups and smoking crack constantly with his father. He also remembers going into Watertown, after which Robert Woolfolk followed, and the two of them watching out for one another until Robert ran afoul of the Latin Kings and Mingus was beaten up to pay for it. Mingus reflects on all of this before Dylan comes to visit.

Part 3, Chapter 15 – Dylan reflects sadly on how Mingus has said the ring is useless to him. Mingus assures Dylan that all the times he was hustled for money, it wasn't a race thing but because the guys who did it were only thirsty people. Dylan goes to see Robert and gives him the ring. Robert then tells Dylan to fuck himself. When Dylan is caught by the correctional officers, he explains he is only a reporter named Vance Christmas working for the Albany Herald-Ledger. Dylan, on his way out, learns that Robert Woolfolk is dead, having jumped to his death from a tower.

Part 3, Chapter 16 – As Dylan leaves, he realizes Robert's death was a plot he and Mingus had hatched and had been considering for years. On a break from driving, Dylan ventures into the Archives of Traditional Music and the Carmichael Collection at Indiana University. Croft, the long-forgotten nephew of Isabel, is working there now. Croft shows Dylan the place where Rachel lived when she came to Indiana with Croft to live in a hippie commune. Croft explains that Rachel regretted having left Abraham, but that she fell in love with a guy named Jeremy who was violent but charismatic. Croft explains that Jeremy took Rachel away. Dylan realizes his mother fled the "middle spaces" of life—the simple existence of people and their dreams.



Analysis

Friendships vary, Letham continues to argue through the end of the novel. This is still true of Mingus and Dylan, though by the time Dylan visits Mingus in prison, they are no longer really friends. True, they are friendly toward one another, but they are not friends as they were once upon a time. As noted previously, Dylan's visiting of Dean Street and Mingus are physical manifestations of his emotional and mental journey into the past. But the street that was once Dylan's world has completely changed – and has not changed at all. The neighborhood has been restored, but many of the same people and criminal elements remain. Houses that were abandoned, for example, have been rehabbed and are now occupied while some of the kids who ran the streets with Dylan and Mingus are now actually in law enforcement.

Dylan and Mingus themselves come to fully realize Letham's argument that two people who grow up in the same place under the same circumstances can still turn out differently. Dylan, provided he does finish growing up and stops with his drug use, has the potential to be truly successful in his life. Mingus has spent much of his adult life in prison, and probably will be in and out of prison for the rest of his life based on both his record and his recounting of his own life story in Chapter 14. Dylan's trip back into his former life through his visit to Mingus and his visit to Dean Street should not actually be seen as Dylan losing himself, but of him finding himself. The visit is to close the door on the past. The giving of the flying ring to Robert and Robert's own decision to attempt to fly – which is Robert's own inability to move beyond childhood – result in Robert's death. This in turn symbolizes the true end of childhood: people must grow up or they will not succeed in life. In Robert's case, this means death. But such is the powerful hold that childhood has over people. The Aeroman ring comes not only to symbolize the joys of childhood, but the pain of growing up – and accepting it.

As the novel comes to a close, there is one final missing piece of Dylan's childhood which he follows up on. He wants to find out what happened to his mother. Dylan travels to the University of Indiana to meet with Croft, the nephew of Isabel. Croft admits to running away with Rachel, but notes that Rachel ended up running off with another man – and has not been heard from since. Dylan comes to recognize similarities between his mother and himself. Yet, while Rachel was running away from life for her own selfish reasons, wanting to avoid being a typical American with a simple but good existence, Dylan struggles to live life as it is and to make the most of it.

Discussion Question 1

How do Rachel and Dylan compare to one another? How do they differ from one another? What do you believe accounts for the difference in how they approach life?



Discussion Question 2

What important realizations does Dylan have while visiting Mingus in prison? Why does this matter so much to Dylan with respect to his recollections of childhood? What does it mean for Dylan in the present?

Discussion Question 3

Why does Dylan sneak into the prison? What comes of the conversations he has with Mingus and Robert when he does so? What does this ultimately mean for Robert, and the idea of childhood for all three men?

Vocabulary

motley, stoical, ramshackle, revamping, moribund, conundrum, moldering, bifurcated, expatriate, jaunty, memorabilia, prerogative, neophyte, bourgeois, docility, raconteur, Podunk, negativistic, ebulliently, eminence, flayed, incredulous



Characters

Dylan Ebdus

Dylan Ebdus is the protagonist of *The Fortress of Solitude* and the first-person narrator of Part 3 of the novel. In the present, he is a white man approaching forty who lives in Berkeley, California, where he works as a music journalist. Dylan is originally from Dean Street in Brooklyn, where he grew up as one of the few white kids in an otherwise all-minority neighborhood. Dylan lived with his parents, Abraham and Rachel, and became best friends with Mingus. The two bonded over a love of comics, but despite their similarities, ultimately grew up to have very different lives. Dylan returns to Dean Street not only to visit the places of his youth, but also to visit Mingus in jail. It is during this visit that Dylan's longing for a return to childhood is finally overcome.

Mingus Rude

Mingus Rude is a black man approaching forty who is currently serving time in Watertown Prison for various crimes relating to drugs and theft. Mingus is originally from Dean Street, Brooklyn, where he lived with his drug-addicted father, Barrett Rude, Junior. Mingus is lured in by the street early on, where he takes to drugs, graffiti tagging, and other assorted crimes. Mingus heavily influences Dylan to do the same, but ultimately, the two part ways. Mingus is first jailed for manslaughter when he kills his grandfather for pulling a gun on him and Junior, and spends the next two decades of his life in and out of jail and rehab programs. He is glad to see Dylan has turned out well in life and is disheartened to consider that his own life will never be as good as it once was.

Arthur Lomb

Arthur Lomb is a white man approaching forty who is a landlord in Brooklyn. Arthur grew up as a kid with Mingus and Dylan and got heavily into drugs before getting himself clean and setting himself down a path of business. Arthur meets with Dylan when Dylan visits New York. Like Dylan, Arthur has largely fallen out of touch with Mingus, so much so that he uses a previous visit to Mingus in prison as an excuse not to have to visit him again.

Abraham Ebdus

Abraham Ebdus is the father of Dylan and the former husband of Rachel (who left him). Abraham is currently dating the younger Francesca and works as both an experimental filmmaker and as a famous science fiction novel cover artist. It is Abraham who reveals to Dylan in Part 3 of the novel that Mingus has had to give up one of his kidneys in order to save the life of his father, Barrett, Junior.



Rachel Ebdus

Rachel Ebdus is the mother of Dylan and the former wife of Abraham. In the present, her whereabouts are unknown. Rachel despised the quiet and simple life her husband and son wanted on Dean Street and so abandoned them to pursue her own selfish ends by striking out across the country with Croft. She was last known to be heading further West with a violent but charismatic man named Jeremy.

Barrett Rude, Junior

Barrett “Barry” Rude, Junior is the father of Mingus and the son of Barrett Rude, Senior. Barrett Junior is a washed-up singer and former member of the 1960s black soul group, The Distinctions. Barrett is heavily addicted to drugs and even encourages his son to use them as well. Barrett’s kidneys ultimately fail due to his drug use and alcoholism, and he only survives when Mingus donates a kidney to him. He remains alive when Dylan visits Dean Street in the early 2000s, and has wasted away to nothing thanks to his drug addiction.

Barrett Rude, Senior

Barrett Rude, Senior is the father of Barrett Rude, Junior, and the grandfather of Mingus. Senior is a former pastor whose romantic pursuit of much younger girls has him under watch from the police. Nevertheless, Senior is horrified by the drug use of his son and grandson and goes to the police over it. When they do not act on it, Senior confronts his son and grandson with a gun – and is shot to death by Mingus.

Isabel Vendle

Isabel Vendle is an old-world, old-moneyed descendant of the Dutch gentry and residents of early New York. Isabel is determined to restore the neighborhood of her ancestry to its former glory, and so begins investing, rehabbing, and inviting white families to move into the buildings she buys. Isabel ultimately dies, but her will has provided money to white contractors and investors to continue her legacy after her death.

Croft Vendle

Croft Vendle is the nephew of Isabel. Croft visits Isabel before her death and remains visiting with her while she is in the hospital. Croft runs off with Rachel to a commune in Indiana but then loses Rachel to another man. Croft meets with Dylan many years later to reveal what he knows of Rachel and what happened after they left New York.



Robert Woolfolk

Robert Woolfolk is a black man approaching forty who grew up down from Dean Street on Pacific Street in Brooklyn. Robert was once a bully and an opponent to Dylan and Mingus, but eventually befriended them and became even closer with Mingus over their mutual love and dealing of drugs. By the end of the novel, Robert is in jail and is visited by Dylan. Dylan gives Robert the flying ring and Robert, unable to move past childhood and accept adulthood, actually tries to fly out of the prison. Instead, he falls to his death.



Symbols and Symbolism

Spaldeens

Spaldeens are sports balls and represent the innocence of childhood. Spaldeens are used in games ranging from stickball to wall ball to porch ball that are played among the kids of Dean Street. Dylan and Mingus are frequent users of spaldeens, which in turn represent a simple, happy childhood game that has not been affected by other pressures in life.

Comic books

Comic books symbolize the commonality between Dylan and Mingus. While Dylan and Mingus are white and black, respectively, and although they have different backgrounds, they bond over a mutual love of comic books. These comic books are kept with them through their teenage years and their condition at that time reflects the different priorities and stages of their lives. Dylan keeps his comics in perfect condition, reflecting his love of childhood and nostalgia for it. Arthur keeps his in fair shape and sells them to Dylan, reflecting his future business acumen in leasing buildings. Mingus's comics are essentially ruined, reflecting a destroyed childhood and his uncaring attitude toward almost anything in life except drugs.

Tossing of cash

Dylan's tossing down of cash for the comic books symbolizes his break with Dean Street and his assertion that he is no longer of the place. The act of throwing down the cash metaphorically shows that Dylan has effectively paid his dues, lived his life on Dean Street, and now looks forward to the next part of his life – while Arthur and Mingus are still caught up in the childhood mentality that there is no world beyond their street.

Flying ring

The flying ring symbolizes both the joys of childhood and the pains of being an adult. The flying ring is a small, silver pinky ring that belonged to Aaron Doily, a homeless drug-addict who believed he could fly – a power Dylan, Mingus, and Robert come to believe rests with the ring. With the ring, they pretend to be superheroes as children. In adulthood, their consideration of the ring is painful as it reminds them that they are no longer children.



Postcards

The postcards that appear in the novel symbolize abandonment. Postcards are mailed to Dylan on occasion from Rachel after she abandons him and his father for Croft, and then Jeremy. The postcards are at first eagerly received by Dylan, but later come to be more mysterious and sad to him as a reminder of what he has lost and that he was abandoned by his mother.

Marijuana

Marijuana symbolizes both a loss of innocence and the destructive nature of using drugs. This is the choice drug of the 1970s among the kids of Dean Street, and the author illustrates a sociocultural expectation that black kids use marijuana. Using marijuana exposes Dylan and Mingus to the seedier side of life on Dean Street as well as the drug's prevalence among criminals, gangs, and thugs. Marijuana serves as a gateway drug for all of the characters who use it, as they move from marijuana into cocaine, and it provides the destructive path around drugs which their lives will revolve.

Cocaine

Cocaine symbolizes destruction and death. Cocaine is a hard drug that becomes popular in the 1980s, and is fashioned into crack as the decade wears on. All of the main characters of the novel use the drug, from Dylan to Mingus to Arthur to Robert to Barrett, Junior. The drug lands all of them in some kind of trouble but despite derailing their lives, none of them stop taking the drug. The most startling depiction of long-term use – Barrett, Junior's wasted-away form and kidney failures – is not even enough to be convincing. Even Mingus's action of shooting his grandfather to death for confronting him and Junior over their use of cocaine is not enough to bring about positive change for the characters.

Abraham's film

Abraham's film represents the changing face of the Dean Street neighborhood. Having worked on the film for years, Abraham's film documents the people, the place, and the changes they undergo. The film causes Dylan to reflect sadly on the past and on the idea that time means change, even for Dean Street.

Cover paintings

Cover paintings symbolize success, and are painted by Abraham for the science fiction book industry. He becomes famous for these paintings, even being invited to speak at science fiction conventions. The paintings represent the idea that success is indeed possible despite the circumstances in which someone finds themselves. Abraham, a



young single father in a bad neighborhood, succeeds beyond his wildest expectations because he remains committed to doing well in life and providing for his son.

Robert's death

Robert Woolfolk's death symbolizes the final death of childhood and the closing of the door on the past. Robert, after being given the ring by Dylan, actually believes he can fly away from prison. He retains a strong childhood mentality of being able to do anything he wants – but this leads to his death. The death itself is a clear break from life, a clear break from the past, and it resoundingly demonstrates that one can never return to the past because one must grow up.



Settings

Dean Street

The section of Dean Street located between Nevins and Bond Streets serves as the main setting of the first part of the novel, and a place to which Dylan returns to visit in the third part. Dean Street symbolizes childhood and the nostalgia for childhood, and it is a physical manifestation of Dylan's mental and emotional journey into the past. Dean Street is primarily black and minority in terms of residential makeup. It is physically run-down, with dilapidated and abandoned buildings. Dean Street is part of a revitalization effort begun by sole white resident Isabel Vendle, and later becomes home to several white families. For Dylan, Mingus, and others, Dean Street marks the extent of their world: nothing beyond Dean matters or exists in any significant way.

Mingus goes even further in considering Dean Street an island against the rest of the world. For Dylan, Dean Street is his Fortress of Solitude, a place of memories to which he can go back when he is sad. The idea that childhood on Dean Street is a Fortress of Solitude is a direct reference to the mutual love of comics that Dean and Mingus have (the Fortress of Solitude being Superman's headquarters). Dylan ultimately moves away from Dean Street and when he visits years later, he finds much of the place both changed and unchanged. The place looks better physically but many of the same people and criminal elements remain on Dean.

Berkeley

Berkeley is a city in California where Dylan attends college and then moves to live and work as a music journalist. It is, in almost all respects, exactly what Dean Street was not: predominantly white, middle class, safe, and well-functioning. Dylan's journey into adulthood sends him to Berkeley in order to get away from everything Dean Street was – though Dylan cannot help but look back on childhood with fondness.

Indiana

Indiana is a Midwestern state in the United States of America. It is the home of the University of Indiana, and Croft Vendle. This setting is where Dylan stops on his return drive to California in order to learn more about what became of his mother. Dylan learns very little in Indiana and continues on his way.

Watertown

Watertown is located in upstate New York, and is the location of a major prison. Watertown is where Dylan travels from Dean Street before heading west to Indiana. It is in the prison at Watertown that Mingus and Robert have been incarcerated for their



respective crimes. It is at this setting that Dylan and Mingus realize they are not really friends anymore, and it here that Dylan finally breaks with the past, giving the ring to Robert, and learning of his death fall when trying to fly. Watertown itself is symbolically used: a high water mark is the height at which a wave or a tide will reach. Watertown is the limit of Dylan's childhood.

Anaheim

Anaheim is a city suburb of Los Angeles. It is where ForbiddenCon is being hosted and is where Abraham is not only to speak to audiences, but to meet up with Dylan. Anaheim becomes the city in which Dylan begins his journey into the past after learning from Abraham that Mingus had to donate a kidney to Barrett, Junior.



Themes and Motifs

Different Types of Friendship

Friendships come in many different ways as seen in *The Fortress of Solitude*. This is true of many of the friendships begun – and ended – in the novel. Most significant is the friendship between Dylan and Mingus.

Early in the novel, Rachel predicts that Dylan and Mingus will be best friends. This turns out to be exactly true. Outwardly, Dylan and Mingus seem to have little in common, from the color of their skin to their family situations to the kind of men their fathers are. However, despite these many differences, Dylan and Mingus instantly bond over their mutual love of comics. It is as if they become friends in spite of their differences because they share one important thing in common. Their friendship ultimately expands from this point.

Dylan and Arthur later strike up an unusual friendship as well. Dylan and Arthur are from different blocks and have different situations at home, despite the fact they are both white. However, their mutual love of comics and their attending the same school bring them together in friendship. Dylan's act of vouching for Arthur allows for the friendship that blossoms between Arthur and Mingus, and Arthur and other kids in the neighborhood. The friendship between Arthur and the other kids on Dean is varied the way that the friendship between Mingus and Dylan is. Likewise, the strange friendship that develops with Robert later in the novel is based on a common use and addiction to drugs – a commonality that later almost leads to violence against Arthur from Robert.

The friendships that Dylan, Mingus, Arthur, and Robert have are made possible primarily by childhood. Childhood allows them to overlook many things that otherwise matter when they are older. These things – coming down on the wrong side of a drug deal, sociocultural pressures, and so on – ultimately come to drive them all apart as friends. Dylan recognizes this when he visits Mingus in prison. The two share good memories and remain friendly with one another, but are no longer friends.

The Different Paths of Individuals

The differing paths of individuals who grew up under similar circumstances are explored thematically through the main characters in *The Fortress of Solitude*. While Dylan and Mingus have much in common by way of upbringing and setting, they end up in vastly different places in life.

Dylan and Mingus both grow up on Dean Street. Both characters grow up with single fathers. Both are without their mothers because their mothers have walked out. Both of these characters resent their mothers for their abandonment, and both come from financially humble backgrounds. Both Dylan and Mingus attend the same schools, have the same friends, and share everything from a love of comics to doing drugs together.



However, as the years pass, the two friends – despite certain destructive similarities such as drug use – end up on polar opposite ends of life. Dylan heads off to an elite high school while Mingus can barely attend his own. Dylan leaves Dean Street for college while Mingus heads to jail for killing his grandfather. Dylan ultimately comes to live in California of his own free will, while Mingus ends up in prison once more in Watertown. When Dylan goes to visit Mingus, the differences between them could not be clearer, simply by their physical situations: Mingus is a drug addict behind bars, while Dylan is a drug addict who has managed to develop a writing career at will. Mingus has had every opportunity that Dylan did to get out of Dean Street, but Mingus went the way of the crowd.

The situation with people growing up under the same circumstances and then taking radically different paths is also referenced by way of Robert and Arthur. Robert's upbringing is in many ways very similar to both Dylan's and Mingus's, while Arthur shares only some similarities (his family is better off financially, he lives in a slightly better part of the city, and so on). Robert ends up a drug addict in jail just like Dylan, despite having every chance to avoid such an ending. Alternately, Arthur hits rock bottom when a drug deal with Robert nearly goes south, but Arthur manages to clean himself up and goes on to be a building owner with five properties to his name.

The Street is One's World

Author Jonathan Lethem places thematic significance on the setting of *The Fortress of Solitude*, arguing that one's street is one's entire world. This concept holds true for many characters in the novel that live on Dean Street in Brooklyn. Early in the story, the narrator points out that Dylan's life consists of two worlds: There is an indoor world at home and an outdoor world on the street; and outside, there are two worlds – Dean Street and everywhere beyond Dean Street.

Dylan and Mingus take to Dean Street like it is an extended front yard. They know everyone and they know the sights, sounds, gossip, and physical features of the place they call home. They defend it against interlopers like Robert, but welcome friends like Arthur. All of the kids of the neighborhood congregate toward the center of Dean, for the streets beyond Dean represent the unknown and uncertainty. The certainty of childhood rests within the boundaries and borders of Dean Street. Even adults like Abraham and Barrett, Junior, come to regard Dean as the extent of the only world they really wish to know.

However, Rachel is dissatisfied with what she considers to be a small existence. Rachel argues that there is a world beyond Dean Street and, unhappy with the simple but safe existence of family life, Rachel abandons her husband and son. Years later, as Dylan gets older and watches his friends enter a circle of drugs and listlessness, Dylan himself leaves Dean Street for college and a world beyond the borders of the street. Dylan thus leaves Dean Street for reasons similar to Rachel's, but not identical. Dylan ultimately ends up a successful music journalist in California, while Mingus ends up in jail.



Nearly twenty years after leaving Dean Street, Dylan returns to see the place both changed and still the same. Much has been improved upon, buildings have been refinished, and sidewalks repaved – but many of the same people and all of the same crime remains rooted firmly in the place. Dylan realizes that Dean Street is not the extent of his world anymore. When he visits Mingus in jail, he learns that Dean Street is all Mingus ever had. Mingus calls Dean Street an island in a great sea. As such, it is more than just his world – but the means to his very survival.

Racism

Racism is not limited to whites, but exists amongst all races, argues Jonathan Lethem in *The Fortress of Solitude*. Racism is very predominant in the 1970s, but Dean Street only catches glimpses of it. Much of it is experienced by Dylan himself, but not all of it is.

When the novel begins, readers are introduced to the old-world racism of Isabel Vendle, who wishes to restore the Dean Street neighborhood to its former glory. As such, she hires only whites to work on the buildings she buys and rents and sells the buildings only to white people. Because of her efforts, more and more white people move into the area, including Dylan and his family.

The first few whites on the block, however, are treated with suspicion and condescension by local minority residents. Dylan comes to earn the racist moniker “white boy,” which ultimately comes to bother him greatly. When dressed up as Aeroman one night, Dylan prevents a white boy from being beaten up by two black kids just because he is white.

Elsewhere, Mingus and his friends use Dylan’s white skin color to their advantage. For example, the racist attitude of department store owners against blacks causes them to pay attention to Mingus and his black friends, but not to Dylan who steals spray paint without incurring anyone’s suspicions. Years later, Dylan intentionally visits an all-black bar noted for anti-white hostility. Dylan himself displays a racial tendency by dating a black girl because in many ways it brings him back to his youth and living on a nearly all-black street.

The Powerful Hold of Childhood

The hold of childhood is powerful, particularly in times of transition in life. Childhood is a time in which anything and everything are possible, life is carefree, and things that really come to matter with age (such as responsibility, skin color, etc.) do not matter. While some individuals can deal with the passage of time and leaving the lifestyle of childhood behind, others cannot.

When Dylan, Mingus, Arthur, and Robert are young, their only confrontations have to do with who is on what street and whether or not they have been invited. They spend their days reading comics, playing ball, and running around with other kids. As they become older kids, Mingus begins smoking marijuana and then brings Dylan into it. Mingus also



brings Dylan into the world of graffiti tagging and theft. Both Dylan and Mingus dress up as a superhero and seek to fight crime even though they themselves are committing crimes – a paradox of the place between childhood and adulthood. As they become teenagers, Dylan, Mingus, and others get into heavier drugs like cocaine and continue on with their childish antics as though they have not aged and life will always be as it was when they were children.

This proves not to be the case. The drug use of Mingus and his father leads to a violent confrontation with Barrett Senior in which Mingus shoots his grandfather to death. Mingus spends the next two decades of his life in and out of jail, doing drugs, in and out of rehab, and in and out of jail again. Mingus has only ever known the childhood life of Dean Street and so is not equipped to deal with the harsh realities of adulthood. Dylan, despite his drug use, manages to graduate from college (albeit after being kicked out of his first college for drug use), and to obtain steady employment as a music journalist.

Despite his handling of adulthood, Dylan reflects on childhood with nostalgia. He misses his childhood greatly and even keeps mementos of childhood – including the flying ring – in a sort of shrine in his attic in Berkeley. Dylan desperately wants to return to childhood because he remembers it with greater warmth for what he thinks it was rather than what it really was. Dylan's return to Dean Street as an adult reminds him of the reality that childhood can never be re-attained or relived. The acceptance of the end of childhood means accepting reality and accepting the changes that come with life. Dylan manages to accept this, while Mingus and Robert do not. This is especially true of Robert, who, with the ring in hand, actually tries to fly out of the prison – but kills himself in the process. This action reflects his inability to accept anything beyond childhood (and the only thing he has ever known or tried to know) – and to accept the fact that actions as an adult have serious consequences.



Styles

Point of View

The *Fortress of Solitude* is related from both the third-person and first-person narrative modes. Part 1 of the novel is related from the third-person omniscient perspective, from the point of view of an unnamed narrator. Part 1 follows the childhoods of both Dylan and Mingus, with their backgrounds, characters, and circumstances illustrated through exposition and dialogue. This is important because it lays the groundwork for their adulthoods beyond Part 1. Part 2 acts as a transition that bridges the gap between Dylan's childhood and Dylan's adulthood some twenty years later. Part 2 takes the form of a journalistic article composed by Dylan. Part 3 takes on a new narrative style – the first-person perspective – related from the point of view of Dylan himself. Because Dylan's life now exists independently of his friendship with Mingus and because his story is entirely his own, Dylan now takes control of the telling of the story. With Mingus in jail, Dylan has fallen out of touch and little is now known about Mingus. Therefore it makes sense that Dylan should assume control of the narrative. Just as there has been a transition in Dylan's life from childhood on Dean Street to adulthood in California, so too has there been a transition in the physical nature of the novel by way of the narration itself.

Language and Meaning

The *Fortress of Solitude* is related in educated language replete with large and unusual words both in the first and third parts of the novel, despite who the narrator is. This is done for at least two reasons. First, the educated nature of the language (words ranging from peevish to avuncular to polyrhythm) is reflective of the fact that Dylan, despite his life on Dean Street and despite his use of drugs, is a very educated man. The proof of Dylan's intellect comes through in his language and manner of speaking. It also means that just because one is brought up under conditions like those of Dean Street does not mean one will adopt the language common in such a place. Second, the educated language casts an almost glorified eye on life on Dean Street, as though the educated language contrastingly justifies the seedy, criminal, and immoral nature of the lives of many of the people who live there. This is in keeping with Dylan's romanticization of his childhood on Dean Street, making it into more than what it was and focusing only on the good moments.

Structure

Jonathan Lethem divides his novel *The Fortress of Solitude* into three primary parts, with the first and third parts being subdivided into chapters. The first part of the novel, told in the third-person perspective, deals with the childhood of Dylan and Mingus from the time they are little until the time when they are eighteen and head off to college and



jail, respectively. Part 2 of the novel takes the form of a music journal article written by Dylan which recounts the history and career of Mingus's father, including the shooting of Mingus's grandfather. Part 3 of the novel deals with the adulthoods of Dylan, Mingus, Robert, Arthur, and others some twenty years later, and is told from the point of view of Dylan himself. Each chapter within Parts 1 and 3 deal with a specific set of events, situations, or circumstances relating to the plot. For example, Chapter 14 of Part 3 deals with a brief history of Mingus's adult life leading to his incarceration in Watertown, while Chapter 18 of Part 1 deals with Dylan preparing to head off to college.



Quotes

There were two worlds.

-- Narrator (Part 1, Chapter 1)

Importance: Isabel Vendle wishes to restore the Dean Street neighborhood to its former glory. She begins renting out to whites, which is partly how Dylan's family comes to live in a heavily-minority neighborhood. As such, Dylan has two worlds: an indoor world and an outdoor world. However, this statement is also symbolic of the two worlds Dylan inhabits by way of being white, and being white in a heavily-minority place. There are also two worlds in Dylan's life in terms of location: Dean Street, and the world beyond. For Dylan as a child, there is no knowable world beyond Dean.

Gaze long enough into Dean Street and Dean Street will gaze into you.

-- Narrator (Part 1, Chapter 3)

Importance: Here, the narrator explains how people come to live on Dean Street, and how Dean Street affects and influences their lives – especially when they have lived there for a while. Dean Street seems to draw out the best and the worst in people, all depending on the person, the situation, and how Dean Street can make people almost a physical part of its identity. For example, while Abraham does not believe in a world beyond Dean Street, Rachel fights with him and leaves in part because she knows Dean Street is not the extent of the world.

His son is your age. He's going to be your new best friend, that's my prediction.

-- Rachel Ebdus (Part 1, Chapter 4)

Importance: Before Rachel leaves home, she tells Dylan about the boy who has moved in next door, Mingus. Rachel says that Dylan and Mingus will end up being best friends. Her prediction turns out to be correct, as Dylan finally finds a best friend in Mingus, which will in turn affect the rest of his life.

There was no way to tell her how right and wrong she was at once, no way to make her evaporate.

-- Narrator (Part 1, Chapter 8)

Importance: When Dylan is hanging out with Mingus and Robert, he is stunned to see how well the two former enemies are getting along. Dylan cannot understand why. A blond, racist woman approaches and asks Dylan if he is okay, as he is surrounded by black kids. Dylan says that he is okay, but also realizes the woman is very right. Something is very wrong, but it has to do with Mingus and not him, and it has to do with the woman's racism.

The white kid has one set of feelings, the black kid another.

-- Narrator (Part 1, Chapter 9)



Importance: Despite having much in common, the changing neighborhood, their home lives, and their cultural and social influences create differences between Dylan and Mingus. For example, Mingus begins smoking cigarettes and using drugs while Dylan does not. These sorts of things are exemplified by the narrator's statement that both boys have different sets of feelings.

Dean Street of course infiltrated their work, it couldn't not.
-- Narrator (Part 1, Chapter 15)

Importance: As noted earlier by the narrator, the lives of the kids growing up on Dean Street are heavily influenced by Dean Street itself. However, the lives of adults are also heavily influenced by Dean Street. For example, much of Abraham's film consists of images and film of Dean Street.

But who in this day and age got answers to his questions?
-- Narrator (Part 1, Chapter 15)

Importance: Life is full of unexpected twists, turns, and miseries. People will ask questions about life, from situations like Mingus ending up in the newspaper as Aeroman to whether or not Abraham and his son are cursed by God. Rarely are answers forthcoming, but this is a part of the way of life on Dean Street.

My childhood is the only part of my life that wasn't, uh, overwhelmed by my childhood.
-- Dylan (Part 3, Chapter 1)

Importance: When speaking to his girlfriend, Abby, about why he keeps things around from his childhood, Abby demands to know why Dylan is so obsessed with his childhood in general. Dylan explains that it is because his childhood was an amazing time for the most part, and that it was the time in which he grew up and the only part of his life not overwhelmed by the knowledge that he cannot go back.

But this change in the ring seemed a message that Aeroman had grown up.
-- Dylan (Part 3, Chapter 8)

Importance: When Dylan attempts to fly at college in California, it is no longer the same. His attempt and the ring both seem very different. This is a symbolic reflection of Dylan's having grown up. He is not a child anymore, and his inability to fly, as well as the change of the ring, prove it.

The abandoned house wasn't abandoned.
-- Dylan (Part 3, Chapter 10)

Importance: When Dylan returns to Dean Street to visit, much has changed but much has remained the same. The old abandoned house has been rehabbed and is now being lived in, while some kids who used to live on the block are still around, such as Marilla. Others, like Alberto and Henry, have gone on to careers in law enforcement.



The neighborhood itself has been given a facelift, but still retains the same kind of dejected people like Barrett.

I'd journeyed back, from that distance at which Mingus had sometimes seemed and implausibility, a myth. Now he was before me, in the all-too human flesh.

-- Dylan (Part 3, Chapter 11)

Importance: Dylan and Mingus see one another again for the first time in years at the prison where Mingus is serving time. Mingus remains the same person, though he now resembles his father in certain ways – such as having sickly yellow eyes. The meeting is a flooding back of the past.

Barry and Dylan, both lingered in a romance of Dean Street. Dose saw the block for the fragile island it was, at sea in the larger neighborhood...

-- Narrator (Part 3, Chapter 13)

Importance: When Dylan and Mingus talk about the past, Dylan learns just how important and how vital life on Dean Street was to Mingus. Mingus compares Dean to an island in an ocean – a refuge, a place to survive. In other words, Mingus was never prepared for life beyond everything he knew on Dean Street.