

The Grass Harp Study Guide

The Grass Harp by Truman Capote

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Plot Summary

The Grass Harp is a story told by Collin Fenwick, an orphan whose life spent with eccentric relatives enriches him more than he could ever have imagined. Collin is especially close to his aunt Dolly, a gentle soul whose only act of rebellion occurs one autumn when she removes herself and a few others to live in a tree house in a sprawling tree on the outskirts of a small Southern town. The episode teaches lessons of love and life for those who inhabit the tree house as well as those who try to extricate the rebels from their firm positions.

Collin is only eleven-years-old when he comes to live with the Talbo sisters, Verena and Dolly in a small Southern town. Collin recalls that his parents married at a very young age and were very much in love, his mother reduced to tears each time her husband would have to leave for his traveling salesman job. Collin's mother dies before she reaches the age of thirty and Collin's father is devastated by the loss and launches into a whirlwind of destructive behavior belying his grief. Collin's father's cousin, Verena Talbo, arrives to take Collin to live with her and her sister, Dolly. Soon after Collin arrives at the Talbo residence, Collin's father is killed in an automobile accident leaving Collin an orphan.

Collin grows up in the big Talbo house where he is slightly frightened by the aggressive businesswoman, Verena, but adores Dolly, a gentle, sensitive person. Collin is also very fond of Dolly's friend, Catherine, who lives in a small building at the back of the Talbo property. Catherine had also been orphaned as a girl and lived with the Talbo sisters since their father brought her to the house to live. Verena is envious of the relationship that Collin, Dolly and Catherine share but is too vain to admit her emotional weaknesses and needs.

Dolly and Catherine have a small cottage industry of making a dropsy cure from boiling down selected herbs. Verena, who is an assertive businesswoman, brings home a man from Chicago one day with the secret intent of producing the dropsy potion in mass quantities for sale once they have wrestled the formula away from Dolly. This intrusion into Dolly's affairs launches the normally reticent Dolly into a rebellious move that shocks not only Verena but also the entire town.

Dolly, Collin and Catherine take a few belongings and some provisions and move into the tree house in a China tree on the outskirts of town. During this time, they learn about each other as well as two other townspeople who take up temporary residence with them, Judge Charlie Cool and Riley Henderson. The story that ensues is a series of attempts by Verena and the authorities to extricate the tree house dwellers but Dolly will not be moved until she is sure that the decision is hers alone and not the wishes of anyone else. The lessons learned during these few days in autumn reveal deep emotions of love, betrayal and enduring bonds forged by people brought together in unusual circumstances that somehow seem completely normal.



Chapter 1

Chapter 1 Summary

The Grass Harp is a story told by Collin Fenwick, an orphan whose life spent with eccentric relatives enriches him more than he could ever have imagined. Collin is especially close to his aunt Dolly, a gentle soul whose only act of rebellion occurs one autumn when she removes herself and a few others to live in a tree house in a sprawling tree on the outskirts of a small Southern town. The episode teaches lessons of love and life for those who inhabit the tree house as well as those who try to extricate the rebels from their firm positions.

As the novel begins, the narrator, Collin Fenwick, describes the landscape of River Woods, on the outskirts of the rural Alabama town where he lives. The wooded area is the site of the China tree that sits near a field of tall Indian grass near the town cemetery. Collin recalls that his aunt Dolly had told him that the wind rustling through the tall grass reminded her of a grass harp creating the sound of humanlike voices. According to Dolly, this grass harp tells the story of the people who live or who have ever lived in the area.

Collin recalls the unsettling circumstances that brought him to live with his father's two cousins, Verena and Dolly Talbo, unmarried ladies unaccustomed to the care of children. Collin's father had been antagonistic toward the two women for years and Collin does not know these distant relatives when he is transitioned to their care after the death of Collin's mother. Distraught with grief, Collin's father breaks down emotionally and Verena arrives at the Fenwick home to rescue the young Collin.

When the arrangements between Verena and Collin's father are completed, Dolly's friend Catherine Creek arrives at the house to pack Collin's belongings. Collin's father drives Collin to the Talbo house later that day. A few days later Collin's father is killed in a car accident and Collin is completely orphaned at the age of eleven and in the complete care of the Talbo sisters.

Collin has never received much attention and revels in his new status as orphan in the home of the town's wealthiest women. Verena owns most of the businesses in town while Dolly keeps the big house where the family resides. Collin immediately gravitates toward the gentle-spirited Dolly and these two spend as little time as possible in the company of the domineering Verena. Dolly's friend, Catherine, lives in a small building at the back of the Talbo house and avoids Verena as much as possible.

Catherine grew up with Dolly and Verena when their father, Uriah Talbo, hires the orphan Catherine to help in the Talbo house. Catherine claims to be an Indian and dresses in Indian style clothes although most people believe Catherine is a black woman because of the depth of her skin color. Collin recalls that most of Catherine's



teeth are missing forcing Catherine to stuff her jaws with cotton balls rendering her unintelligible to anyone other than Dolly.

Catherine has such a distaste for Verena's cold manner because Catherine believes that Verena has tried to displace Catherine in Dolly's affections and remove her from the Talbo existence altogether. Catherine is not to be deterred and her friendship for Dolly grows over the years as the two women join in their small business of developing an herbal remedy for dropsy. One a week Dolly and Catherine walk out to the wooded area of River Woods to gather the herbs necessary for their homemade potion. Collin later learns that Dolly sells her dropsy potion via mail order to customers all over the state.

While Dolly is ethereal, gentle and soft-spoken living in her bedroom painted floor and ceiling in pink paint and furnished with pink items, Verena is cool and calculating. Verena's bedroom is set up more like an office than a room for repose and Verena can be found late at night examining business ledgers by lamplight.

Verena has never married and has never recovered from the betrayal of a woman friend named Maudie Laura Murphy who resisted Verena's affections in favor of marriage to a man who takes Maudie away to live in Arizona.

By the time Collin turns sixteen, he is great friends with both Dolly and Catherine and revels in a happy home life. Collin is careful to never reveal too much of his life to his friends or others who may not understand the unconventional lifestyle of this fragmented family. Dolly and Catherine take special delight in raising Collin and Collin remembers hot coffee and biscuits after school spent in the warm, cozy kitchen environment created by the two women.

Although Dolly and Catherine can supply comfort and nurturing to the growing Collin, he cannot rely on help with his school studies from the women who have no interest or predilection for academics. Dolly and Catherine are creatures of nature and rely on instincts rather than education for their part of Collin's development. For the most part Verena is left out of the close-knit threesome because of her aggressive behavior and manipulative outbursts.

Collin, Dolly and Catherine make a weekly pilgrimage to the River Woods to gather herbs for Dolly's dropsy potion. These scavenging events are also occasions for picnics held in the branches of a double-trunk China tree that holds a tree house in the span between the two trees. Dolly does not share the contents of her bag of herbs with the others because the exact formula for the potion is known only to Dolly herself.

One day Dolly tells Collin of the day Dolly had learned how to make the potion. When Dolly was a young girl, she witnessed three gypsy women in her father's barn one April night. One of the women is in labor trying to deliver her child and Dolly is fascinated by the sight of the three strangers. When the women realize that Dolly is not going to report them for trespassing, they ask Dolly to bring a light to illuminate the area and make the childbirth easier. After the delivery, Dolly helps wash the newborn child and wrap it in a scarf. As payment for her kindness, one of the older gypsy women gives Dolly a rhyme



about all the elements needed for the potion. "Boil till dark and pure if you want a dropsy cure." Chapter 1, Page 17

Once brewed and bottled, the potion is sold via mail order with sales averaging six bottles a week at two dollars per bottle. Dolly splits the profits with Collin and Catherine and the threesome are avid spenders for items found advertised in magazines. Verena shows no real interest in the potion venture until the year the threesome make enough money to be required to pay income tax. Dolly remains stiff-lipped, however, and will not reveal the formula to Verena whose visions of a potion enterprise are temporarily silenced.

One year Verena returns from a Chicago shopping trip accompanied by a man named Dr. Morris Ritz, a Jewish man twenty years Verena's junior. The town buzzes with gossip as Verena and Dr. Ritz are seen about town and on daily walks to an abandoned canning factory. On the pretense of a social visit, Verena invites Dr. Ritz to dinner one day and it is eventually revealed that Dr. Ritz' mission in town is to help produce the dropsy potion. Dolly stands firm in her refusal to provide the formula to the scheming Verena and Dr. Ritz.

Later that day Verena shares with Dolly the plans already in place to convert the old canning factory into a factory to produce dropsy medicine. Dolly still refuses to reveal the formula for the potion despite Verena's attempts to make Dolly feel guilty for Verena's financial support for so many years. Dolly counters that Dolly has provided a beautiful home for Verena all these years and had hoped that her contribution meant something but now realizes that Dolly, Collin and Catherine will have to leave the house.

At dawn the next morning, Dolly awakens Collin to tell him that he, Dolly and Catherine are leaving to live in the China tree house. With a few provisions, the threesome arrives at their new home just as the new day begins.

Chapter 1 Analysis

The author utilizes the literary technique of flashback as the novel begins. Collin is an adult man reminiscing about his happy life with the Talbo sisters and especially the events leading up to the move to the China tree house. A flashback means that the author lets the reader peer into the memories of a character. This allows the author the ability to provide details that will help the reader's understanding of the story without the need for establishing scenes and dialogues in the plot line. The author also establishes the setting as a small rural town in Alabama in the 1930's or 1940's. In addition, the most important revelation in this chapter is the explanation of the book's title. Dolly describes the wind blowing through the tall Indian grass as a grass harp. "Do you hear? That is the grass harp, always telling a story—it knows the stories of all the people on the hill, of all the people who ever lived, and when we are dead it will tell ours too." Chapter 1, Page 9



Chapter 2

Chapter 2 Summary

As Dolly, Catherine and Collin eat breakfast in the China tree, they are startled by a gunshot fired by Riley Henderson, a young man hunting in the nearby woods. As Riley approaches the China tree, Catherine admonishes the young man for frightening the tree's inhabitants. After learning of the circumstances leading to the exodus to the tree house, Riley shares some squirrels so that Dolly, Catherine and Collin can fix a meal later. Riley joins the others in the tree house and the group shares cake and cigarettes before Riley departs on his way back to town.

Collin recalls that Riley had been born in China of missionary parents and returns to the small Alabama town upon the death of Riley's father. Riley's mother, Rose, inherited money from her own father and raises Riley and two daughters until Rose experiences a mental breakdown and is sent away to an institution on the Gulf Coast. Riley and his sisters are forced to live with their uncle, Horace Holton, with whom Riley has many conflicts. Eventually it is revealed that Horace has been siphoning money from Rose's account so Horace leaves town for New Orleans where he finds a job marrying couples on a riverboat.

Riley becomes head of the Henderson household and lives according to his own rules while watching out carefully for his two sisters. Riley remembers being envious of Riley's freedom and sense of sophistication even though the two boys are very close in age.

When Riley returns to town from his hunting excursion, he learns that most of the townspeople are buzzing with gossip about Dolly's running away from home. Verena, after finding Dolly's note telling of her departure, finds Dr. Ritz and the two summon the sheriff, Junius Candle, to intervene. Telegrams are dispatched to surrounding sheriff's departments to alert them to the wandering threesome of Dolly, Catherine and Collin.

While this flurry of activity is swirling in town, the inhabitants of the tree house eat a leisurely lunch, bathe in the creek and enter into a discussion about their future. Before long, a search party led by Junius Candle approaches the China tree and are shocked to find the missing threesome sitting in the tree house. Dolly is unmoved by Junius' pleas for Dolly and the others to return to town and eventually one of the other men present, Judge Cool, sees the logic in Dolly's plan and joins the tree house group.

Collin recalls that Judge Cool had been educated at Harvard and had traveled abroad twice making him the most distinguished man in town. The judge had married a woman from Kentucky who was not a sociable person leading to the judge being somewhat ostracized in the town. When the judge's wife becomes ill, the couple travels to the places they had visited on their honeymoon in Europe and the judge's wife dies on the trip. Upon his return home, the judge returns to his home that has been taken over by



his two sons and their wives. The judge is relegated to divide his time between the two families in his own home.

Before nightfall, Riley returns to join the tree house group to inform them of the excitement in town by their refusal to leave the tree. Dolly is upset by all the commotion but the judge steels the group and prepares them for the next onslaught of townspeople, which will most assuredly come.

Chapter 2 Analysis

The tree house in the China tree has become a haven for misfits who have found each other and understand each other's reasons for being on the outskirts of society. The underlying current of all the tree house inhabitants' stories is alienation from typical society through either choice or circumstance. Dolly's delicate sensibilities prevent her from interacting in the same commercial world as her sister. Catherine's questionable heritage separates her from the rest of the people in town. Both Catherine and Collin are orphans, which makes them different from most other people. Riley is essentially orphaned too and has had to fend for himself and his sisters. The judge has lived on the outskirts of the town's nucleus due to his choice of an antisocial wife and ungrateful children. The tree house symbolizes a place for these people to rise above the others who persist in trying to make them fit into the societal structure when they have their own branches of support with each other and in the safety of the China tree.



Chapter 3

Chapter 3 Summary

As the Judge launches into a spirited speech on their predicament, he is caught up in feelings for Dolly whom he says is a pagan spirit, a quality that he has never seen exhibited in the typically reticent Dolly. The Judge continues his rant and confides that he has never had that one special person in the world with whom he can share everything. The Judge also declares that the tree house inhabitants are all fools with common eccentricities and this experience in the tree will allow them to share with each other without fear of ridicule.

The Judge tells the group that he has been the butt of his sons' disdain especially since an incident in which the Judge enters into a pen pal relationship with a girl in Alaska. Catherine shares that she had once received a marriage proposal from a man named Bill in Florida but never told anyone. Riley confides that he is drifting in his life not sure where to go or how to proceed and that his purposeless existence makes his wish for death sometimes.

The Judge counsels Riley that Riley must fall in love with basic, simple things first before he can find his true purpose and love of his life. Dolly declares that she has been in love all her life, although not with a gentleman. Dolly is mad for the color pink and other things that she considers her first loves: "a dried honeycomb, an empty hornet's nest, other things, or an orange stuck with cloves and a jaybird's egg—when I loved those love collected inside me so that it went flying about like a bird in a sunflower field." Chapter 3, Page 45

Catherine does not buy into the Judge's philosophy of love as the basis for people's decisions and declares that the group of misfits is sitting in the China tree to escape the actions of others. Catherine's tone breaks the mood of the conversation and the group drifts off to sleep with the Judge welcomed underneath a portion of Dolly's quilt.

Chapter 3 Analysis

The haven of the tree house under the cover of darkness allows the inhabitants to share some innermost feelings initiated by the Judge. As the story unfolds, the shared traits of the misfits are identified and the Judge offers that love is the answer for all of them. Instead of being outcast, for the first time the Judge sheds light on the beautiful spirits, which reside in the people in the tree and they feel safe enough to share parts of themselves typically kept hidden. Catherine is the only one to dismiss this theory and her position will separate her from the group that will soon become evident.



Chapter 4

Chapter 4 Summary

The next morning Riley and Collin awaken early, climb down from the tree without waking the others, and head toward the river for some morning fun. Riley invites Collin onto a houseboat where Riley spends much of his time away from town. The two boys spend the morning swimming and fishing. When Collin catches a fish with his bare hands, Collin feels catapulted into Riley's universe of apparent self-assuredness and feels that the two will be good friends.

Unbeknownst to Collin and Riley, the sheriff has returned to the China tree accompanied by deputies and an arrest warrant. As Collin and Riley walk back to the tree, they are startled by Catherine's piercing screams. Running now toward the China tree the two boys encounter a frantic Catherine running toward them, her dress practically ripped off in front. The sheriff's deputies apprehend the struggling Catherine in an attempt to take her back to town. A fight ensues between the deputies, Collin and Riley but ultimately the men prevail and Catherine is dragged off to be put in jail.

Collin hides out in the woods and overhears one of the deputies tell the sheriff to return to town because there is new trouble with Verena and Dr. Ritz. When the coast is clear, Collin returns to the China tree and seeing it empty begins to cry for the lost dream of its inhabitants. Dolly and the Judge are still sitting in one of the upper branches of the tree however and Dolly comforts Collin with kisses and hugs.

Dolly tells Collin that Catherine had left the tree house earlier that morning in search of the missing Collin. Collin tells Dolly about Catherine's capture and Dolly is convinced that the world is a terrible place and in stark contrast to the evening shared by the tree house inhabitants the night before. Their conversation is halted by the appearance of Riley's sister, Elizabeth, and her friend, Maude Riordan. Elizabeth tells the tree house group that Riley has gone back to town, that they should not worry about him, and that he will return later.

Collin recalls taking piano lessons from Maude's mother in hopes of being closer to Maude but Collin's aspirations for music and love are dashed when Mrs. Riordan diplomatically informs Collin one day that Collin has no musical talent. Now, seeing Maude at the base of the tree with Elizabeth, Collin cannot help but be stirred at the sight of his former flame and wonders what she thinks of the current situation. The two girls seat themselves on the ground and continue a conversation with the tree house inhabitants.

Maude informs the group that Catherine has been arrested for dropping a mason jar on one of the women accompanying the sheriff on his first trip to extricate the group from the tree yesterday. Maude invites Collin to a Halloween party in hopes that Collin will



dress in a skeleton costume and tell the fortunes of the other party guests. Collin tentatively accepts on the condition that he may be in jail at the time of the party.

Elizabeth tells the group that Maude will be playing violin in a state competition on the radio in hopes of winning a music scholarship to college. Maude serenades the group with a piece on her violin and ends when she sees that Riley has returned. Riley orders the girls to return home and lock the doors of the house and they grudgingly obey.

Riley climbs back into the tree house bringing along some provisions for the group including rose and raisin wine, oranges, wieners, rolls, sardines and animal crackers. Riley informs the group that he had followed the deputies who apprehended Catherine and that Catherine had had another big outburst when she was put in one of the cells designated for black people. This apparent insult to Catherine was more than she could abide.

Unfortunately, Riley is not able to reach Catherine to comfort her but Riley does learn another piece of disturbing information while outside the jail. Dr. Ritz has left town unexpectedly and taken with him twelve thousand dollars in bonds and seven hundred dollars cash from Verena's safe. Collin now understands Verena's frantic message for the sheriff to return to town earlier this evening. Dolly fights the urge to go to Verena and tells Collin that she is now sure that the world is a bad place. The group drinks a toast of rose and raisin wine to Catherine and wishes her hope in her predicament.

Chapter 4 Analysis

Capote, in his typical style, also uses figurative language liberally throughout the novella. For example, when Dolly calls to Collin standing on the ground beneath the tree, Capote writes, "'Collin.' My name fell out of the sky. 'Is that you I hear? Are you crying?'" Chapter 4, Page 50 This technique is called personification where inorganic objects are given human characteristics or abilities. Obviously, Collin's name does not fall from the sky but this style adds more lyricism to the writing and more verbal interest for the reader.



Chapter 5

Chapter 5 Summary

The next morning, Collin accompanies Riley into town to get coffee for the group with the additional hopes of garnering information about Catherine and Verena's circumstances. Arriving in town Riley parks the car in an alley to avoid being witnessed and takes off. Collin tries to keep a low profile in the car but is seen by Mr. County behind the bakery Mr. County owns with his wife.

Mr. County invites Collin in to the bakery where Mrs. County feeds Collin a breakfast of cinnamon rolls and coffee. Collin is the same age as the Countys' son, Samuel, who has run off to join the navy and Collin feels an edge of jealousy listening to the stories of the couple. When the topic of Catherine comes up Collin breaks into tears and is comforted by Mrs. County. Mrs. County also tells Collin that she feels that the tree house group should return home because they are exhibiting undignified behavior for people of their standing in the community.

Mrs. County also tells Collin about a wagon parked in the town square. The wagon belongs to an itinerant band of evangelists who are unwelcome in the town according to Mrs. County. When Collin leaves the bakery, he spots the wagon parked where Mrs. County said it would be. The wagon is actually an old truck with a tarpaulin on top to resemble a covered wagon on whose side is a sign reading "Let Little Homer Honey Lasso Your Soul for the Lord."

Collin heads toward the jailhouse and walks back and forth under the high windows whistling in the hopes that Catherine will see him but Catherine never looks out. Collin returns to Riley's car and waits an additional two hours for Riley to return. Riley is in a foul mood when he returns having found his two sisters and Maude Riordan still in bed with the house scattered with Coca-Cola bottles and cigarette butts. Riley tells Collin that he has spanked his sisters over his knee with a tennis shoe but Maude had managed to escape punishment.

During Riley's absence he has also gone to the barbershop for a haircut and because the barber, Amos Legrand, would have all the latest news about Verena's situation. Amos tells Riley that in addition to the twelve thousand seven hundred dollars Dr. Ritz had stolen from Verena, Verena had plans to go into business with Dr. Ritz which is the reason she bought the old canning factory. Verena had also given Dr. Ritz ten thousand dollars to purchase equipment yet Dr. Ritz had never bought anything and added the funds to the money he had stolen from Verena's safe and left for South America.

Riley and Collin speed out of town to relay the news to Dolly but screech to a halt when encountering the evangelist wagon creeping along in front of them. When the wagon comes to a halt, a woman emerges and asks if Riley and Collin can provide directions to the tree where Dolly is living. Collin cannot help but notice fifteen children of all ages



spilling out of the truck. The children are in various stages of rodeo dress but mostly they are frail and hungry looking. The woman introduces herself as Sister Ida the mother of Little Homer Honey, the evangelist, and all the other children crowding around.

Riley ignores Sister's Ida's request for Dolly's location and speeds away from the scene leaving the woman and her children looking after them in the dust. Riley had heard from Amos that during a revival the night before Sister Ida had called Dolly an enemy of Jesus for her outright rebellious behavior. This lie is spread by the town minister who is jealous of the donations pouring in for the little evangelists held in stark contrast to those offered up in his Sunday services.

The minister wastes no time delivering the lie to Verena who upon hearing this news she immediately summoned the sheriff and demanded that the troupe of evangelists is run out of town. The sheriff confiscates all the donations received by the evangelists because they had not procured legal approval to hold their revival and then makes sure that they are on their way out of the county.

At the China tree, the tree house group prepares lunch and Dolly muses over the pain Verena must feel over the betrayal of Dr. Ritz. Collin tells Dolly that Mrs. County thinks the tree house group should disband and go home. Dolly wonders if that is the right decision and if their leaving would mean that they had lost their cause. All Dolly has ever wanted is a life made of her own decisions, and she has never been able to make one decision of her own other than the one to take up residence in the China tree.

Dolly informs Collin that Judge Cool has proposed marriage to Dolly this morning but Dolly has not yet decided to accept. Collin also tells Dolly about the incidents surrounding the revival and Dolly feels bad that the evangelists lost money because Verena was outraged over their comments about Dolly. Dolly asks Collin to escort her to the place where the evangelists had last been seen on the road. Dolly and Collin find Sister Ida and all her children resting nearby in the cemetery.

When Dolly introduces herself, Sister Ida embraces the older woman and claims never to have said a negative word about Dolly. Sister Ida tells Dolly that it is the evangelists' policy to never speak ill of anyone and since Sister Ida has lost all her donations due to the misunderstanding about Dolly hopes that Dolly may be able to intervene on Sister Ida's behalf and get the funds returned. Sister Ida has very little gas in the truck and no money to buy food for her children so Dolly invites the evangelists for lunch.

Collin runs back to the China tree to alert the Judge that the meager stew he is preparing must now feed a significantly larger group. Pulling together an assortment of provisions and adding water, the tree house group prepares an unusual stew that increases in volume and simmers as Dolly brings the evangelists to the tree for lunch.

The Judge is struck by the sight of the dirty children and their outlandish mother in stark contrast to the prim and proper Dolly. After washing in the creek the children are treated



to the impromptu stew as Sister Ida tells the story of her colorful past filled with love and men who would become the father of her many children.

The Judge tells Sister Ida that she could probably win her case in court and get her donations returned but she is in need of immediate cash. Dolly gives Sister Ida forty-seven dollars, all the assets of the tree house group, as well as Judge Cool's gold watch. Sister Ida is visibly moved, accepts the money with deep gratitude and prepares to move her children back into the truck and on their way.

Before the evangelists can depart, however, a crowd carrying torches is seen headed down the road coming toward the China tree. The judge orders the women and small children up into the tree house and instructs Riley, Collin and the older children to gather some rocks and scatter out into the bushes and the other trees where they will not be seen. These maneuvers completed, the Judge takes his position at the base of the China tree and awaits the oncoming crowd.

Chapter 5 Analysis

In addition to the theme of love, Capote writes in this chapter about society's opinion of organized religion. The minister who claims that Sister Ida and Little Homer Honey are frauds shows none of the tolerance and acceptance expected by men who choose the ministry as their life's work. As a metaphor for the spectacle of organized religion, Little Homer Honey and his brothers and sisters are positioned as scam artists working to bilk ordinary people of their hard-earned cash. Dolly takes on an almost Christ like persona as she wholeheartedly forgives Sister Ida for any transgressions and then gives up all the cash she has so that Sister Ida may feed her children. The scene at the China tree is similar to the parable when Jesus multiplies the loaves of bread and fish so that the increasing group may be fed while he speaks to them.



Chapter 6

Chapter 6 Summary

As the children wait in the trees for the approaching men, Little Homer Honey fashions a lasso out of a rope retrieved from under his cowboy hat. Verena and twenty men follow Sheriff Candle up to the China tree brandishing their guns. While the Judge and the sheriff face each other in a stand off, Little Homer Honey lowers the lasso over the head of the minister and snaps it tight around the man's neck. The minister's plight is just the catalyst needed to spur the group into an all out fight complete with cursing, rocks and beatings.

At some point during the altercation, a shot is fired and Riley falls from his perch in the tree. As the crowd rushes toward Riley lying on the ground, Verena demands to know who fired the gun and Dolly answers that it is their own fault. Sister Ida tends to Riley's shoulder wound and some of the men carry Riley off to get him the necessary medical attention. Sister Ida decides it is time to move her brood to their next revival location and touching goodbyes are shared.

Dolly stands up to Verena who accuses Dolly of conniving with people of ill repute and Verena backs down due to her recent disappointment related to Dr. Ritz. Dolly encourages Verena to join the tree house group in the tree and Verena reluctantly complies. Dolly tells Verena that the Judge has proposed marriage to Dolly and Verena incredulously asks about Dolly's answer.

Dolly agonizes over her reply but ultimately declines the Judge's proposal in favor of living with Verena again. Dolly asks the Judge if they have already had their lives and states that some things only get one chance while others get repeated attempts to find new lives. The Judge accepts Dolly's answer, and Verena and Dolly are once again united as sisters. Verena admits envy over Dolly's pink world and her special pain at the most recent betrayal of Dr. Ritz whom Verena loved in a way.

As the rainstorm subsides, the weary tree house group disbands, leaving all their temporary possessions in the tree house to rot and rust.

Chapter 6 Analysis

This chapter brings the climax of the story when the final altercation between the townspeople and the tree house group ensues. The climax means the point in the story to which all the other events have been leading and from which the plot line will now alter and take its course toward conclusion. Sister Ida now has the funds she needs to move on thanks to Dolly's goodness. Verena and Dolly are reconciled, and the Judge knows that he cannot ever break apart the bond between the two sisters who find a particular solace in each other that no one else can understand. It is only in the tree house that Verena has ever revealed her private feelings over the betrayals in her life

and this serves as the turning point for her as she mellows in her interactions with other people from this point on.



Chapter 7

Chapter 7 Summary

With the days of living in the tree house now over, the former inhabitants divide their lives in pre-tree house and post-tree house terms because the event had been so life altering for all of them. The Judge refuses to live in the same house with his sons and daughters-in-law and moves into Miss Bell's boarding house. Collin and Verena had caught colds during the last night at the China tree and Dolly tends to their every need day and night eventually succumbing to walking pneumonia.

The Judge continues to visit Dolly every afternoon bearing gifts of baked goods or flowers much to the chagrin of Catherine who never learned of the Judge's proposal of marriage to Dolly.

Verena purchases a large radio and installs it in Dolly's room to ease her convalescence and Collin paints it pink so that it will fit in with Dolly's furnishings. Dolly and the Judge listen to football games without fail except for the occasion when Maude Riordan plays her violin in the broadcasted state championship. Maude wins second prize although everyone in town believes she should have won first place.

One day Collin encounters Elizabeth Henderson on the street and Elizabeth reminds Collin of the expectation that Collin will dress in a skeleton costume and tell fortunes at the upcoming Halloween party. Collin walks Elizabeth home and sees Riley kissing Maude Riordan, an act of betrayal that temporarily shakes Collin's faith in his friend. After a few days, Collin recovers from the shock and decides that he will attend the Halloween party if he can get a costume made in time.

Dolly and Catherine hurriedly fashion a rough skeleton costume out of black satin, even enlisting the Judge's help to thread needles. Dolly talks about hosting a party in the spring and inviting all her newfound friends. When the ill-fitting costume is completed, Dolly and Collin go to the attic to find a leftover can of silver paint to paint on the image of bones on Collin's costume. Silver paint cannot be found but there is enough gold paint that Dolly declares will suit the purposes just fine.

During the exploration in the attic, Dolly finds the first things she had ever loved: the hollowed honeycomb, a hornet's nest, a shriveled orange studded with cloves and a blue jaybird's egg.

The sound of the courthouse clock interrupts Dolly's sentimental musings and she begins to pain the gold skeleton on the front and back of Collin's costumed body. It is not until Dolly finishes that the two realize the predicament that Collin cannot remove the costume without destroying the gold painted design. Dolly encourages Collin to whirl about in order to facilitate the paint's drying and suddenly clutches her heart and



stumbles to the ground. Collin's calls to Verena go unheard and Collin holds Dolly in his arms, the gold paint rubbing off on her kimono.

Eventually, Catherine hears Collin's calls, and the doctor is brought to the house. Verena, Catherine, the Judge and Collin wait outside Dolly's room with strict doctor's orders not to bother Dolly. At sunrise, Collin sees the veil of Dolly's hat reflected in a mirror in a hall and knows instinctively that Dolly has died.

After Dolly's death neither Collin nor Catherine want to spend any time in the Talbo house. Collin begins to run around and hang out in the bar downtown and Catherine cannot be moved from her home at the back of the Talbo property. Catherine adopts Dolly's habit of overindulging in sweets and wears Dolly's clothes until she can no longer fit into them. Collin visits Catherine with less and less frequency and is annoyed because Catherine is no longer intelligible having refused to put cotton in her jaws any longer. Collin spends a little time with Riley but Riley is busy clearing the ninety acres he had purchased in order to build houses. Before long, Riley and Maude Riordan are engaged to be married and Collin serves as an usher at their June wedding.

After the wedding, Collin and Verena both admit that they each want to go away. Verena had wanted to take an ocean trip with Dolly and hopes that Collin will now accompany her but Collin has plans to enroll in law school. Before he leaves town, Collin visits Judge Cool and the pair strolls out to the River Woods where Collin hopes that the Judge can hear Dolly's grass harp telling the stories of all who had lived there.

Chapter 7 Analysis

The author uses the literary technique of symbolism in the scene of Dolly's death when Collin, dressed as a skeleton, embraces the dying Dolly in his arms. Skeletons are used throughout literature as a symbol of death and Collin's costume foretells the imminent outcome and the end of Dolly's life. Capote uses many examples of lyrical language in his books and the passage of Dolly's death is just one example. Capote writes, "There was in the hall a hat tree with many antlers and a mirror. Dolly's velvet hat hung there, and at sunrise, as breezes trickled through the house, the mirror reflected its quivering veil. Then I knew as good as anything that Dolly had left us." Chapter 7, Page 94. The image of Dolly's veil floating by the mirror is a poetic way of saying that this delicate creature had left the earth in the same manner in which she inhabited it.



Characters

Collin Fenwick

The protagonist and narrator of the story is Collin Fenwick, an orphaned boy who grows up in the eccentric household of his father's cousins, Verena and Dolly Talbo, two sisters living in a small Southern town. Collin is only eleven-years-old when he arrives at the Talbo house to live but recalls that from that time until he turned sixteen were glorious years. As an orphan, Collin never completely fits in at school and prefers the company of the gentle-spirited Dolly and her friend, Catherine, who prepare wonderful after school treats for Collin in the homey kitchen of the big house. During the autumn, Collin turns sixteen, he moves to a tree house in a China tree during a temporary rebellious act initiated by Dolly. Collin learns much about the human spirit and living with the courage of personal convictions during this eccentric experience. Collin is still maturing and stuck between the other two important male characters in the book, the free-spirited Riley Henderson and the well-respected Judge Charlie Cool. Collin finds himself wanting to be like both of them and not doing very well at the job. After the tree house episode has ended, Collin views life differently, is more confident in his interactions with people, and can manage through disappointments better than before.

Verena Talbo

Verena Talbo is the younger of the two Talbo sisters although she seems older because of her aggressive, brusque manner. Although Verena owns most of the businesses in town, Verena is not readily accepted by the community because of her unpleasant demeanor. Verena is almost an outsider in her own home too excluded from the activities and close relationship shared by Dolly, Collin and Catherine. If Verena is bothered by this, she does not show it openly and that could be her fatal flaw. Verena swallows disappointment and betrayal and never lets anyone see her vulnerabilities, essentially pushing people even further away at times. Verena had loved a young woman, Maudie Laura Murphy, who worked in the town and is devastated when Maudie runs away to marry a liquor salesman and never returns to town. Collin can see into Verena's room and knows that Verena cries over letter from Maudie. Verena is also betrayed by Dr. Morris Ritz, the man she has brought from Chicago to help develop a factory to produce Dolly's dropsy cure. When Dr. Ritz steals thousands of dollars from Verena without ever producing anything, Verena is shocked by yet another major disappointment. Eventually Verena realizes that the only person she needs is her sister, Dolly, and becomes a kinder person with a more pleasing countenance.

Dolly Talbo

Dolly is the elder of the two eccentric Talbo sisters but seems younger because of her passive and self-effacing manner. Collin learns to be especially fond of Dolly for her



gentle, kind ways and recalls the times spent with her as glorious days. Dolly is an unusual choice for the affections of a young boy due to her provincial manners and almost Victorian style of dress but Collin sees through to Dolly's true heart of forgiveness and love. Dolly is considered to be eccentric by the people in town because she, like Verena, has never married and spends much of her time with her friend Catherine gathering herbs on the outskirts of town in order to brew a dropsy cure from a recipe given to her by a gypsy woman. Dolly sells the potion via a mail order business in order to help as many people as possible and delights in testimonial letters that return telling Dolly how her efforts have relieved the discomfort of people who have used it. Dolly's typical passive behavior is tested one day when she learns that Verena has made secret plans to mass-produce the dropsy potion for financial gain. The dropsy recipe is the only thing that has truly belonged to Dolly and she will not turn it over to anyone for any reason. Dolly's rebellious act of moving temporarily to a tree house at the outskirts of town teaches lessons not only to the aggressive Verena but also to those who inhabit the tree with her as well as those who attempt to remove her from it.

Catherine Creek

Catherine is Dolly's best friend from childhood having been brought to the Talbo household as an orphaned girl by Dolly's father. Catherine lives in a small building at the back of the Talbo property yet is very involved in the house activities especially with helping to raise Collin. Catherine swears that she is an Indian woman but people in town think that she is a black woman, a fact that infuriates the proud woman, especially when she is put in the colored section during a short stay in jail. Catherine eccentricities show in her dress and in the odd way she talks due to stuffing her slack jaws with cotton.

Maudie Laura Murphy

Maudie Laura Murphy is the woman of Verena's unrequited affections. Verena is devastated when Maudie marries a liquor salesman from St. Louis. Verena gives the couple a honeymoon trip to the Grand Canyon. They never return, leaving Verena to forever grieve over her loss.

Uriah Talbo

Uriah Talbo, the father of Verena and Dolly Talbo, hires the orphan, Catherine Creek, to help in the Talbo household.

Gypsy Women

As a young girl, Dolly encounters three gypsy women in her father's barn. As payment for helping one of the women to deliver a child, one of the other gypsy women provides Dolly with the ingredients and a rhyme for making a dropsy cure.



Dr. Morris Ritz

Dr. Morris Ritz is the man whom Verena meets during a shopping trip to Chicago. Dr. Ritz claims to be a scientist whom Verena hopes will help mass produce Dolly's dropsy potion so that Verena can establish another business. Eventually, Dr. Ritz unexpectedly runs away to South America with \$12,700 of Verena's money.

Riley Henderson

Riley Henderson is a young man who lives in the tree house temporarily during Dolly's rebellion. Riley is a contemporary of Collin's but a young man of much more worldly experience. Riley's father died when Riley was young and Riley's mother is in a mental institution leaving Riley to not only care for himself but also his two younger sisters. After the tree house episode, Riley matures, marries and becomes a businessman in the town.

Horace Holton

Horace Holton is Rose Henderson's brother and the uncle of Riley Henderson and his sisters. Horace leaves town after being found guilty of siphoning money from Rose's bank account for his own.

Junius Candle

Junius Candle is the sheriff of the small town who attempts to intervene and end the tree house sitting incident. Junius will one day become a state Senator.

Judge Charles Cool

Judge Cool is well-respected but considered an outsider in the town primarily because of his marriage to an anti-social woman from Kentucky. After his wife dies, the Judge is forced to live with his two sons and daughters-in-law in his own home and is essentially a prisoner to their whims. When the opportunity to live with the rebellious crew in the tree house presents itself, the Judge seizes it and finds the experience exhilarating and freeing. The Judge becomes especially important to Dolly to whom he proposes marriage and to Collin who looks up to the Judge as a strong male figure.

Elizabeth Henderson

Elizabeth is a girl of Collin's age and the sister of Riley Henderson.



Maude Riordan

Maude Riordan is a girl a year older than Collin and on whom Collin has a romantic crush.

Mr. and Mrs. County

Mr. and Mrs. County own the town bakery and provide treats and advice for Collin on several occasions in his boyhood.

Amos Legrand

Amos Legrand is the town barber and the major source of all the gossip and information available in the town.

Little Homer Honey

Little Homer Honey is the child evangelist and son of Sister Ida.

Sister Ida Honey

Sister Ida is the mother of Little Homer Honey, the child evangelist, in addition to fourteen other children in the traveling mission. Sister Ida is a gregarious free spirit whose life revolves around finding money to feed her children and buy gas for their rundown truck in order to get them to the next revival. Sister Ida is befriended by Dolly whose kindness is a rarity to the world-wizened Sister Ida.



Objects/Places

River Woods

River Woods is the wooded area on the outskirts of town where the China tree sits near a field of tall Indian grass bordering the town cemetery.

China tree

The double-trunk China tree near River Woods holds a tree house amid its branches and is the setting for the escape of Dolly, Catherine, Collin, Riley and Judge Cool.

County Bakery

The bakery in the town is owned by Mr. and Mrs. County, a prosperous and sociable couple who provide emotional support to Collin throughout his life.

Barber shop

The barbershop in the town is run by Amos Legrand who manages to keep the gossip and information network functioning.

Little Homer Honey Wagon

The Little Homer Honey Wagon is a rundown truck fitted with a tarpaulin so that the vehicle resembles a covered wagon. It is the vehicle in which Sister Ida transports her big brood of little evangelists.

Jailhouse

The jail house is a square building in the town next to the Ford dealership and is the site of Catherine's incarceration for hitting a woman on the head with a mason jar.

The creek

The creek sits close to the China tree and is the source of bathing and splashing for the tree house group and their guests.



Miss Bell's Boarding House

Judge Cool refuses to live with his sons and daughters-in-law after the tree house episode and moves into Miss Bell's boarding house for a peaceful existence.

Dropsy potion

Dolly learns a recipe for a dropsy potion from a grateful gypsy woman and spends much of her time gathering the necessary herbs so that she may brew the medicine and sell it via the mail.

The Talbo House

The Talbo house is the home of Dolly and Verena Talbo and the home Collin finds when he is orphaned at the age of eleven. Collin finds special days in the cheery, warm kitchen and explores memories and haunted emotions in the overfilled attic.



Social Sensitivity

In *The Grass Harp*, Capote raises the issue of society's attitudes toward the disabled, race, religion, the elderly, and family. Collin Fenwick overlooks Dolly Talbo's eccentric behavior because he appreciates her kind and gentle personality, but many of the townspeople believe she is weak and perhaps slightly retarded; some even describe her as her sister Verena's "cross." When Dolly, Catherine, and Collin leave home and take up residence in a tree-house, their neighbors agree that Verena should send the sheriff to bring the runaways home. Both civic authorities and average citizens speak patronizingly to Dolly; only Collin, Catherine, and Judge Cool seem aware of her skills as an herbalist. Interestingly enough, most of the respect Dolly receives comes from outsiders—mail order customers who swear by her dropsy cure and even Dr. Morris Ritz, who comes from Chicago to exploit her formula.

Catherine Creek, clearly another eccentric, serves to highlight the racial theme.

A quaint character who claims to be an Indian, and who dresses accordingly, Catherine idolizes Dolly, the only person who not only understands her garbled words but also accepts her bizarre ideas.

Both women are social misfits and objects of amused condescension, but because the townspeople believe that she is actually African-American, Catherine is treated more roughly, especially by the sheriff, who manhandles her as he takes her to jail. The dispute concerning her racial identity adds to her separation from local society.

The treatment of Judge Cool by his family reflects society's attitudes toward the elderly. Once a distinguished member of the community, his grown children now consider him somewhat senile; so for some time they have spied on him and tried to manipulate him. On the other hand, many of his fellow citizens respect his judgment, and few seem particularly surprised when he joins the runaways in the tree-house; yet his Kentucky-born sons are embarrassed by his behavior and relieved when he gives them his property and moves to Miss Bell's boardinghouse.

Capote adopts a negative tone toward religion. The characters associated with traditional religion seem overbearing and hypocritical. Riley Henderson's uncle, Horace Holton, first steals the Henderson children's inheritance and then sets himself up as a Minister of Romance, marrying couples on a Mississippi River excursion steamer. Likewise, the sanctimonious attitude of Reverend and Mrs. Buster leads the reader to share Collin's delight when an orangeade jar dropped from the tree hits Mrs. Buster squarely in the head. In contrast, the traveling child evangelist, Little Homer Honey, and his mother, Sister Ida, seem not to be con men but preachers of a sincere—if distorted—Christianity.

Like most of Capote's novels, *The Grass Harp* challenges the traditional definition of family. Collin and Riley are orphans, but each has first been abandoned by an emotionally unstable parent. Riley is forced to create a nuclear family for himself and his

sisters, but Dolly provides the emotional support of a family for Collin and, surprisingly, also for Verena and Catherine. Thus, Dolly's death breaks up the Talbo family—an effect that no other arrival or departure has been able to achieve.



Techniques

Characteristic of Capote's technique is his extensive use of nature symbolism.

The grass harp itself is the most important symbol. A tract of high Indian grass located below the town cemetery, the field displays brilliant colors in autumn, when the grass becomes a harp of voices as the wind plays through it. Dolly tells Collin that nature is telling the stories of the dead and the wind is the voice of people like the two of them. Thus, the novel is the music of the grass harp; and Collin shows real talent as a musician of words and ideas.

A second symbol is the two China trees growing linked together and bridged by a very old tree-house. Built about two generations before Collin first sees it, the tree-house becomes a place where Collin can take refuge, Judge Cook can be himself, Dolly can experiment with cigarettes and other types of rebellion, and all the characters can explore the secrets of their own personalities. Like the grass harp, the tree-house is a highlight of River Woods, which also is not only the source of ingredients for Dolly's herbal medicine, but a primary link between nature and these characters.

The medicine's formula too becomes a symbol when Dolly explains its link to her individuality. Based upon a rhyme revealed to her when she assisted a young gypsy woman in childbirth, the cure seems genuinely effective, and it is the one possession and the only secret Dolly has reserved for herself. As such, it becomes both the object of a power struggle between her and Verena and a major instrument advancing the plot.

Like the medicinal formula, Dolly's choice of sweets as her diet is a gesture of independence and, in this case, an attempt to hold on to her childhood. Early in the novel, Collin discovers Dolly searching the attic for her lost treasures—a collection of childhood souvenirs she had long ago surrendered to Verena. Finding these items—a hollowed honeycomb, a hornet's nest, a clove-stuck orange, and a jaybird's egg—Dolly finally regains control of her childhood and reasserts control of her own life, just a few hours before her fatal stroke. Thus, Capote seems to imply that one cannot achieve true independence so long as one is cut off from the past.

Similarly, Judge Cool's watch functions as a symbol. He attaches it to a limb of the china tree, where "its feathery faded ticking might have been the heartbeat of the delicate thing, a firefly, a frog." In fact its ticking appears to echo the heartbeats of Dolly and the Judge, and the Judge explains that listening to the watch's sounds makes the day seem longer. Until he finds love with Dolly, the Judge needs the days to be as long as possible, but after Dolly has tacitly accepted his marriage proposal, he can pass the watch along to Sister Ida, who now needs it more than he.

Another of Capote's strengths is his detailed descriptions. Using one or two revealing characteristics—like Verena's "virile eyebrows" and "dainty cheekmole" or Dr. Ritz's bow ties and "sharp jazzy suits—he deftly sketches the personality of the character. His language is consistently vivid and poetic: he compares the tree-house to "a raft floating



on a sea of leaves" and portrays the moon seen through "a gauze of starlight." Moods sifted through the Talbo house, Capote tells his readers, "like a sour yellow mist" he characterizes Elizabeth Henderson as "banana-boned" and speaks of "the snowflake of Dolly's face."

Capote creates intense word pictures of places like the Talbo kitchen: ". . . there was a hook rug on the floor, rocking chairs; ranged along the walls were pictures of kittens, an enthusiasm of Dolly's; there was a geranium plant that bloomed, then bloomed again all year round, and Catherine's goldfish, in a bowl on the oilcloth-covered table, fanned their tails through the portals of the coral castle."

More striking, though, are his fanciful descriptions of people like Judge Cool: "He might have been put together from parts of a tree, for his nose was like a wooden peg, his legs were strong as old roots, and his eyebrows were thick, tough as strips of bark. Among the topmost branches were bears of silvery moss the color of his center-parted hair, and the cowhide sycamore leaves, sifting down from a neighboring taller tree, were the color of his cheeks."



Themes

Being on the Outside

One of the major themes throughout most of Capote's work is alienation in the family and from society. Many of Capote's characters have been orphaned or have other vulnerabilities that make them different from mainstream society. This theme of being on the outside mirrors Capote's own life and especially his childhood where he is sent to live with an aunt at a young age displacing the traditional feelings and emotions inherent in a typical nuclear family. Capote's homosexuality, especially during the time he was growing up in the 1940's and 1950's, was a social taboo further alienating the emotionally vulnerable Capote. In the Grass Harp, all the important characters in the book have been ostracized by society or are on the outside by circumstances both within and beyond their control. Verena separates herself by her brusque manner. Dolly retires within her protective shell of picking herbs and puttering around the big house. Collin is an orphan forced to live with eccentric relatives he has never known. Catherine had also been orphaned and is now ostracized because people think she is a black woman. Riley is essentially an orphan forced to raise himself and two younger sisters. Judge Cool is kept on the fringe of society by his anti-social wife and is alienated in his own home after her death. Sister Ida Honey is reviled for raising her family as traveling evangelists. This feeling of being on the outside of society vanishes for all the characters though during the rebellious days spent in the tree house where they learn to accept each other and develop new insights about those whose company they are usually denied.

Nature

Elements of nature figure prominently in the story, the most obvious being the China tree in which the tree house is built and where Dolly and her rebels live for a few days. Dolly is especially in tune with nature and the seasons and early in the story tells Collin about the sound of the wind blowing through the tall Indian grass sounding to her like a grass harp telling the stories of the people who have ever lived in the area. Dolly also spends much of her time in the River Woods gathering herbs for her dropsy potion and when she walks anywhere Dolly's eyes are always looking for new herbs and natural elements to utilize. Toward the end of the book, Dolly reveals the first things that she has loved: a hollowed honeycomb, a hornet's nest, an orange studded with cloves and a blue jaybird's egg. All these things are elements of nature and Dolly finds them both comforting and beautiful. Capote uses nature as the backdrop for the story because it is universal and available to everyone regardless of social status or acceptance within societal groups. Nature is the foundation for all life and in this story, the characters, especially Dolly, need that touch point to stay grounded in a world that is many times outside her control. Dolly finds that nature is very calming to her anxious soul and she lets herself be swallowed up by the natural as a soothing element to her critical, but toxic, relationship with Verena. It is also interesting that Dolly makes what little money



she earns using elements of nature and extends her feelings of care and comfort to others in need via the dropsy potion she sells. Natural elements are also things that cannot be taken away from anyone, which is especially important to Dolly and her friends who have suffered much loss and betrayal in their lives.

Love and Acceptance

Each one of the characters in the story comes from a place of loss or betrayal and struggles to find the love that will enrich them and hopefully make them whole. In spite of their eccentricities, though, Dolly and Verena make room in their hearts and in their home for the orphaned Collin whose young life has been marred by tremendous tragedy. Conversely, Collin learns to accept and love the Talbo sisters and Catherine and in spite of the unusual living arrangement, looks back fondly as the early years spent at the Talbo house were the best years of Collin's life. Catherine is also accepted in the house in spite of her odd behavior and is befriended by Dolly especially who learns to love Catherine as another sister. The love between Verena and Dolly is based on mutual dependence and in spite of some transgressions, the sisters vow at the end that they need only each other to be happy. Dolly even passes on a marriage proposal from Judge Cool who has never known unconditional love in his life, making his character seem almost more tragic than those who have lost love or been betrayed by it. Instead of being angry at Dolly for her unreturned affections, the Judge considers Dolly to be an invaluable person in his life for her indomitable spirit and visits her every day until her death a short time after the tree house incident. This complete acceptance of Dolly, even though she has not acquiesced to his whims, further establishes the Judge's character as a man of honor and nobility. At the end of the book, even Verena has learned the grace of acceptance and knows that there are people who will outsmart her and not return offered love. However, she is satisfied that she cannot control everyone as she has Dolly and that the domineering type of relationship she has with Dolly is the only way she can live happily. Ultimately, the main lesson learned during the tree house rebellion is that love is most essential to life and that love takes many forms so each person should be considered lucky to have found the best love for her or himself.

Significant Topics

The Grass Harp develops Capote's recurring theme of a sensitive and intelligent young boy who grows up without the stability of a traditional family and is thus isolated from the society around him. The youthful protagonist must explore the dimensions of his personality, determine the nature of his relationship with the natural and social worlds, and then come to terms with his own sexuality. As in several other Capote novels, the mature protagonist reflects upon lifechanging experiences that took place during his teen years. Several years after the deaths of Dolly and Verena, a nostalgic Collin Fenwick reminisces about the five years he spent with the Talbo sisters—and especially about the rebellious days of living in the tree-house.



As is generally the case in Capote novels, a major theme is the conflict between personal and community standards of behavior. The most appealing characters in *The Grass Harp* refuse to accede to the practical or the conventional. Dolly will not allow Verena and Dr. Morris Ritz to exploit her "dropsy cure" formula, although she could have fancy labels and a profitable business. The Harvard-educated Judge Charlie Cool has found that his ideas of justice do not correspond precisely with the law; thus, he champions the cause of social misfits such as Dolly Talbo, Riley Henderson, Sister Ida Honey, and Catherine Creek, who—more than any other character in this novel—celebrates eccentricity. Fiercely loyal to the woman she calls "Dollyheart," Catherine accepts Collin but remains suspicious of Judge Cool and actively dislikes Verena, whom she refers to as "That One."

Family is a significant theme in Truman Capote's fiction, but his characters rarely are part of traditional families; in fact, in this novel only minor characters like the Riordans and the Countys belong to conventional nuclear families. Sister Ida Honey, for example, left her family after bearing her brother-in-law's illegitimate child, and of her fifteen additional children, only a few were not born out of wedlock. Superficially more conventional is Judge Charlie Cool's relationship with his sons and their wives, but he tells Collin and Dolly that they spy on him and they are ashamed of him.

More typical are the Talbos. Upon the death of his mother and the emotional breakdown of his father, Collin Fenwick was taken in by his father's cousins, Verena and Dolly Talbo, both of whom are middle-aged and unmarried. To all appearances, Verena is the dominant sister, not only managing the finances, but laying down the rules of the household.

When Dolly finally rebels, however, Collin discovers that Verena actually is the emotionally dependent sister, and after Dolly's death, Verena is shattered physically and emotionally.

Riley Henderson, like Collin, has been orphaned, but by assuming the responsibility of rearing his sisters, Elizabeth and Anne, he has also accepted the conventional ideas of family. Thus, logically he becomes a man of affairs in the town—marrying Maude Riordan, becoming a land developer, and pushing the idea of a community-owned silk mill.

Underlying the theme of family is the theme of love. In the course of the novel, Collin finally determines what love is and how one person loves another. From the relationship between Catherine and Dolly, he learns the need for acceptance and mutual respect; on the other hand, he also realizes that—for example, in the case of Verena and Dolly—love can be based upon mutual dependence, as each person's identity is partially shaped by the shared relationship. Judge Cool's courtship of Dolly shows him how knowing one is loved can add strength and confidence to one's personality. Even the distorted relationships provide valuable insights; seeing Verena's reactions to the loss, first of Maudie Laura Murphy, and later of Dr. Morris Ritz, helps prepare Collin to deal with the loss of both Maude Riordan and Riley Henderson when those two marry. The antithesis of love is seen in Judge Cool's relationship with his family. The Judge claims



to have discovered that love is a sequence and an individual must first love an inanimate object, then progress to human relationships with increasing degrees of closeness. Nevertheless, Collin recognizes the meaning of the grass harp is that a major component of love is communication.

Collin first begins to understand the relationship between communication and love when he observes that only he and Dolly can understand what Catherine Creek says. Catherine keeps cotton stuffed in her cheeks; so all her words seem garbled to those who are unfamiliar with her speech, but apparently she has no interest in communicating with Verena or the other townspeople. After Dolly's death, Catherine eventually removes the cotton, but then even Collin cannot understand her words. He interprets this action, not as an attempt to be understood by the rest of the world, but as her way of telling him that she no longer cares whether she converses with him.

Judge Cool emphasizes the thematic link between love and communication where he describes the failure of his relationship with his late wife. The Judge says he has always been looking for the one person to whom he could tell everything. He did not find that completeness of communication with this wife or even with his young Alaskan pen pal, but Collin believes such communication exists between the Judge and Dolly. Thus, they do not need to be married; the existence of the bond between them is enough to add forcefulness to both their personalities, and the loss of Dolly at last reduces Judge Cool to an old man.



Style

Point of View

The story is told in the first person narrative limited point of view. This means that the author uses the narrator, Collin Fenwick, to tell the story so all the events and the characters are viewed from his perspective. Because the point of view is limited, however, means that Collin cannot share the thoughts and feelings of the other characters so the reader has a limited perspective on those characters, learning only what can be shared through Collin's thoughts and the actions of those characters on their own.

This means that the person telling the story is the author himself and he delivers his views and relates events according to his own perception of them. The narrator does not supply any insight into the motives, feelings or actions of any other people and can only relate instances about these people from his own point of view. When there are conversations detailed, the narrator can simply relate what the other person says, and although the narrator may guess at the other person's thoughts, he cannot share them with the reader.

Setting

There are several locations of importance in the book primarily the overall site being a small Southern town. The exact location is never defined but Collin's father is killed nearby in Mobile, Alabama, so the small town is probably somewhere in Alabama. Of secondary importance is the River Woods area, which contains the wooded area where Dolly picks herbs as well as the large area of Indian grass Dolly calls the grass harp. The River Woods area also contains the town cemetery and a creek, which holds Riley Henderson's houseboat. The location most critical to the book is the tree house sitting at the juncture of two China trees also located in the River Woods area. There are other more intimate locations within the story that are important to the plot such as the big Talbo house where Collin comes to live as a young boy. Catherine lives in a small cabin at the back of the Talbo property but spends most of her time inside the main house. Catherine also spends a few days in the city jail for a transgression during the tree house rebellion. Riley shares his houseboat experience with Collin and introduces the younger boy to an independent lifestyle. Collin not only finds comfort in Dolly's kitchen but also in the warmth of the Countys' bakery where he is enveloped by delicious aromas and the hugs of Mrs. County.

Language and Meaning

Capote is well-known for his beautifully descriptive language and this novella follows that pattern. For example, when describing the warmth of the Talbo house kitchen on winter days, Capote writes, "What with a woodstove and an open fireplace, the kitchen



was warm as a cow's tongue. The nearest winter came was to frost the windows with its zero blue breath. If some wizard would like to make me a present, let him give me a bottle filled with the voices of that kitchen, the ha ha ha and fire whispering, a bottle brimming with its buttery sugary bakery smells—" Chapter 1, Page 14 The language used in the dialogues between characters is also truly evocative of Southern charm and dialects of a rural area. Capote is careful to distinguish the style of the town's more distinguished citizens like Verena, Dolly and Judge Cool in contrast to the style of those like Catherine, Riley and Sister Ida who have led less refined lives with little or no education.

Structure

The novella is written in seven chapters and is the retelling of Collin's life spent with the Talbo sisters. The book opens with Collin recalling the grass harp and the happy days spent with Dolly learning lessons about nature and love. Capote uses flashbacks throughout the book to indicate that Collin is remembering parts of his life such as his parents' deaths and his entry into the Talbo world. The flashbacks are a primary portion of the book as Collin remembers that fateful autumn in his sixteenth year when he and a few others joined Dolly in her first and only major rebellion. Capote will periodically draw the reader back to the present day as Collin shares information about his current life in context with his colorful past. Capote does a masterful job of bringing the narrative full circle, as he opens the book with Dolly's description of the grass harp telling the stories of all the people who have ever lived in the area and that it would continue telling the stories long after she and Collin are gone. At the end of the book, after Dolly has died, Collin and Judge Cool walk to the River Woods where they can hear the grass harp where Dolly's story will be forever remembered.



Quotes

"She was one of those people who can disguise themselves as an object in the room, a shadow in the corner, whose presence is a delicate happening. She wore the quietest shoes, plain virginal dresses with hems that touched her ankles. Though older than her sister, she seemed someone who, like myself, Verena had adopted. Pulled and guided by the gravity of Verena's planet, we rotated separately in the outer spaces of the house." Chapter 1, Page 11

"We were friends, Dolly and Catherine and me. I was eleven, then I was sixteen. Though no honors came my way, those were the lovely years." Chapter 1, Page 13

"Just entering the woods there was a double-trunked China tree, really two trees, but their branches were so embraced that you could step from one into the other; in fact, they were bridged by a treehouse: spacious, sturdy, a model of a treehouse, it was like a raft floating in the sea of leaves." Chapter 1, Page 16

"No one in our town ever had themselves so much talked about as Riley Henderson. Older people spoke of him with sighing voices, and those nearer his own age, like myself, were glad to call him mean and hard: that was because he would only let us envy him, would not let us love him, be his friend." Chapter 2, Page 26

"Subtly as the gold watch spun its sound of time, the afternoon curved toward twilight. Mist from the river, autumn haze, trailed moon-colors among the bronze, the blue trees, and a halo, an image of winter, ringed the paling sun. Still the Judge did not leave us: 'Two women and a boy? At the mercy of night? And Junius Candle, those fools up to God knows what? I'm sticking with you.' Surely of the four of us, it was the Judge who had most found his place in the tree." Chapter 2, Page 38

"At least then, a spirit, someone not to be calculated by the eye alone. Spirits are accepters of life, they grant its differences—and consequently are always in trouble." Chapter 3, Page 40

"We are speaking of love. A leaf, a handful of seed—begin with these, learn a little what it is to love. First, a leaf, a fall of rain, then someone to receive what a leaf has taught you, what a fall of rain has ripened. No easy process, understand; it could take a lifetime, it has mine, and still I've never mastered it—I only know how true it is: that love is a chain of love, as nature is a chain of life." Chapter 3, Page 44

"Riley had a few details: he knew that Verena, upon discovering the safe door swung open (this happened in the office she kept above her drygoods store) had whirled around the corner to the Lola Hotel, there to find that Morris Ritz had checked out the



previous evening: she fainted: when they revived her she fainted all over again."
Chapter 4, Page 55

"Dolly's soft face hollowed; an urge to go to Verena was rising, at the same moment some sense of self, a deeper will, held her. Regretfully she gazed at me. 'It's better you know it now, Collin; you shouldn't have to wait until you're as old as I am: the world is a bad place.'" Chapter 4, Page 56

"Dolly smiled, smoothed her long skirt; sifting rays placed rings of sun upon her fingers. 'Was there ever a choice? It's what I want, a choice. To know I could've had another life, all made of my own decisions. That would be making my peace, and truly.'" Chapter 5, Page 68

"Those famous landscapes of youth and woodland water—in after years how often, trailing through the cold rooms of museums, I stopped before such a picture, stood long haunted moments having it recall that gone scene, not as it was, a band of goose-fleshed children dabbling in an autumn creek, but as the painting presented it, husky youths and wading water-diamonded girls; and I've wondered then, wonder now, how they fared, where they went in this world, that extraordinary family." Chapter 5, Page 72

"'You'd best look again: I am myself.' Dolly seemed to pose for inspection. She was as tall as Verena, as assured; nothing about her was incomplete or blurred. 'I've taken your advice: stopped hanging my head, I mean. You told me it made you dizzy. And not many days ago,' she continued, 'you told me that you were ashamed of me. Of Catherine. So much of our lives had been lived for you; it was painful to realize the waste that had been. Can you know what it is, such a feeling of waste?'" Chapter 6, Page 81

"'But we have had our lives,' said Verena. 'Yours has been nothing to despise, I don't think you've required more than you've had; I've envied you always. Come home, Dolly. Leave decisions to me: that, you see, has been my life.'" Chapter 6, Page 83

"'We're not dead,' he told her; but it was as if, to the questioning child, he'd said stars fall into space: an irrefutable, still unsatisfactory answer. Dolly could not accept it: 'You don't' have to be dead. At home, in the kitchen, there is a geranium that blooms over and over. Some plants, though, they bloom just the once, if at all, and nothing more happens to them. They live, but they've had their life.'" Chapter 6, Page 83

"'Envied you, Dolly. Your pink room. I've only knocked at the doors of such rooms, not often—enough to know that now there is no one but you to let me in. Because little Morris, little Morris—help me, I loved him, I did. Not in a womanly way; it was, oh I admit it, that we were kindred spirits. We looked each other in the eye, we saw the same devil, we weren't afraid; it was—merry. But he outsmarted me; I'd known he could, and hoped he wouldn't, and he did, and now: it's too long to be alone, a lifetime.'" Chapter 6, Page 84



"For quite a while it was Catherine's custom to date events as having occurred before or after her incarceration. 'Prior,' she would begin, 'to the time That One made a jailbird of me.' As for the rest of us, we could have divided history along similar lines; that is, in terms of before and after the treehouse. Those few autumn days were a monument and a signpost." Chapter 7, Page 85

"'Charlie said that love is a chain of love. I hope you listened and understood him. Because when you can love one thing,' she held the blue egg as preciously as the Judge had held a leaf, 'you can love another, and that is owning, that is something to live with. Your can forgive everything.'" Chapter 7, Page 93

"I've read that past and future are a spiral, one coil containing the next and predicting its theme. Perhaps this is so; but my own life has seemed to me more a series of closed circles, rings that do not evolve with the freedom of a spiral: for me to get from one to the other has meant a leap, not a glide. What weakens me is the lull between, the wait before I know where to jump. After Dolly died I was a long while dangling." Chapter 7, Page 94

"It was as though neither of us had known where we were headed. Quietly astonished, we surveyed the view from the cemetery hill, and arm in arm descended to the summer-burned, September-burnished field. A waterfall of color flowed across the dry and strumming leaves; and I wanted then for the Judge to hear what Dolly had told me: that it was a grass harp, gathering, telling, a harp of voices remembering a story. We listened." Chapter 7, Page 97

Adaptations

Fine Line Features/New Line Cinema adapted this novel in a critically acclaimed feature film (1995) produced and directed by Charles Matthau. The cast includes Piper Laurie (Dolly), Sissy Spacek (Verena), Walter Matthau (Judge Cool), Nell Carter (Catherine), Jack Lemmon (Morris Ritz), Mary Steenburgen (Sister Ida), and Edward Furlong (Collin).



Key Questions

Like most of Capote's novels, *The Grass Harp* features eccentric characters, themes of misdirected love and individual isolation, extensive and unique symbolism, and poetic physical descriptions of settings and characters. Readers may be interested in identifying the autobiographical elements and their parallels in other Capote works. Because the characters' interaction with society is more important in *The Grass Harp* than in most of Capote's other fiction, the novel should be evaluated for its social portraiture and criticism.

1. Collin and Riley share several characteristics: Both young men are orphans, but Collin's life is dominated by his aunt/guardian, Verena Talbo, while Riley has won his independence from his uncle. Compare their personalities, and explain why their lives take different directions.
2. To the townspeople, Verena Talbo seems to be strong and practical, while her sister Dolly is weak and perhaps a little silly. Verena controls the household and makes all the decisions until finally Dolly rebels and asserts herself. How is each sister both strong and weak? Why does each decide she needs the other?
3. Dolly, Catherine, Collin, Riley, and Judge Cool decide to remain in the china tree and live in the tree-house. What does this place symbolize to these characters and to the author? Why does each come to the tree-house and choose to join the group there? How does the experience change the lives of all the people involved?
4. In this novel there are several supposedly Christian characters—most notably Riley's father and uncle, Sister Ida and Little Homer Honey, Reverend and Mrs. Buster, and Mrs. Macy Wheeler. Which of these characters seem intended to satirize religious hypocrisy? Compare some of these characters with similar ones in Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*.
5. After Dolly's death, Collin leaves for law school, in effect disengaging himself from the other characters in the novel and perhaps to some degree cutting himself off from people in general. How can his actions be explained? Has he truly learned the lessons of love and communication that Dolly, the Judge, and Catherine have tried to teach him?
6. Although Collin is the novel's narrator and protagonist, clearly Dolly is the pivotal character. What does she mean to each of the other characters, and how does her death change their lives and their attitudes?
7. A major theme of the novel is love, both fulfilled and thwarted love. Analyze the failures of romantic love such as Collin and Maude, Verena and Dr. Ritz, Sister Ida and Dan Rainey, Judge Cool and Irene Todd Cool. Why does each of these relationships fail? What similar and different factors are at work in the failures of friendship (e.g., Verena and Maudie Laura Murphy, Collin Fenwick and Riley Henderson)?



8. Music is an important symbol in this novel, from the opening paragraph with its reference to the music of the grass harp to the radio music finally enjoyed by Dolly as an invalid. Collin takes music lessons until Mrs. Riordan refuses to keep him as a pupil. Since he has absolutely no musical ability, why does he insist upon continuing; what do these lessons mean to him? How does music separate him from Maude? Most important, what is the music of the grass harp?

9. This novel is a retrospective narrative which begins and ends with references to a mature Collin, who is relating incidents from his boyhood, specifically events that took place when he was sixteen. Now apparently all or most of the older characters are dead, and Collin returns to the old house only occasionally. What thematic and symbolic effects are created by Capote's use of the frame story device and nostalgic tone?

Topics for Discussion

The tree house almost takes on a personality of its own as the novella extends. Discuss the characteristics and symbolism of this important element.

Talk about the importance of the tree house to each of the main characters, and how each one is changed by the experience of living there for a few days.

Each of the characters is looking for love in the book. Discuss what love means to each one of them and whether or not they have found it or will ever find it.

Dolly is much more passive than her domineering sister Verena but ultimately emerges as the strongest character in the book. What is it about Dolly's character that transcends all the others?

Capote is famous for writing about lessons learned in small Southern towns, parallel to his own childhood. What makes this story Southern? Could the same messages have been conveyed if the setting had been a large metropolitan area?

Discuss Verena's character and why she seems to be betrayed more often than others in the book when she appears to be the most invulnerable.

Catherine is very upset when people in town label her as a black woman. Discuss the relevance of Catherine's feeling in context of life in the South in the 1930's and 1940's.

Literary Precedents

Certainly the theme of thwarted or misdirected love is common in literature, but Judge Cool's theory of the progression of love strongly resembles that espoused by the old man in Carson McCullers' short story "A Tree, a Rock, a Cloud." Verena Talbo also seems closely related to the emotionally starved and physically unattractive grotesques in McCullers's novels, especially Miss Amanda in *The Ballad of the Sad Cafe* (1951; see separate entry). Also, the satire as a young man confronts small town social conventions and religious hypocrisy achieves a comic tone reminiscent of Mark Twain, especially in *Huckleberry Finn* (1884; see separate entry) and *Tom Sawyer* (1876; see separate entry). In addition, Capote exploits comic eccentricity with much the same deft touch that Eudora Welty uses, but his exploration of the way family tensions affect various characters' destinies echoes the more serious concerns of William Faulkner.

Related Titles

Collin Fenwick and his eccentric aunt Dolly Talbo resemble characters seen in *A Christmas Memory* (1966), and the young male orphan taken in by a dominant female relative also appears in *Other Voices, Other Rooms* (1948; see separate entry). In addition, a young man's coming of age is the major theme in *Breakfast at Tiffany's* (1958; see separate entry) and Capote's unfinished work *Answered Prayers* (posthumously published in 1987).

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