

H is for Hawk Study Guide

H is for Hawk by Helen Macdonald

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Plot Summary

H is for Hawk by Helen McDonald is a novel that speaks to the need to develop one's own mechanisms for coping with life's ups and downs. The story opens with the protagonist, Helen talking about her love for birds. Helen has been a falconer for several years, and has recently become interested in a specific type of bird of prey, the Goshawk. Goshawks are notoriously hard to train because they are considered to be one of the most savage birds. Helen returns home one day after watching Goshawks in the woods to hear the shocking news that her father has passed away. Helen was incredibly close to her father and considered him a legend, so the news devastates her.

Part of her grieving involves getting a Goshawk of her own named Mabel. Helen pours her time into training and taming Mabel. It takes some time, but Helen is able to tame Mabel so they're comfortable around one another, but she hasn't taken her out hunting yet. Helen is hesitant about taking Mabel hunting because that means having to let her fly free, and she doesn't know if Mabel will return to her. With the help of her friend Christina and Stuart she is able to let Mabel fly freely without risking her flying away.

While things are going well with Mabel, Helen is having trouble with the rest of her life. She no longer feels comfortable around people. Her father's death causes her to have nightmares, and all she wants to do is retreat into the wild and live like a solitary creature, just like a hawk. She loses her job at the university and will soon be losing her home as well. While this is going on, she finds herself struggling to communicate with people, something which poses a big problem since she has to write a speech for her father's memorial service.

Throughout the book, Helen refers to many different writers. One of them is T.H White. White was a notorious failure in the bird community, and his book is considered to be very amateurish. He ended up losing his bird, nicknamed Gos, because he didn't take care of him correctly. While reading his books, Helen learns about the journey that White went through. The two end up sharing many similarities, trying to use their birds as a way to escape their fear and retreat into the wilds.

Through her hunting with Mabel, Helen is able to confront some of her fears. She writes a touching memorial for her father and realizes that she has family and friends that care about her. Things take a turn for the worse when Helen almost loses Mabel during a hunt. She realizes that just like White, she hasn't been doing a good job of taking care of her bird and has been projecting her own issues onto Mabel.

Helen realizes that she needs help and starts to see a therapist. That winter, Helen and her family go to visit friends in America. They help take care of Helen and she ends up having an amazing time, even though she was separated from Mabel and not hiding away in the wilds. When Helen returns home, she thanks all of her friends that have been supporting her and starts looking for a new job and a place to live. Helen still misses her father, but she knows that she has to go on living her life and just can't run away from her problems.



Chapters 1-2

Summary

Chapter 1

The protagonist opens the book talking about an area east of Cambridge known as the Brecklands. The Brecklands are a mostly forested area surrounded by ruined homes and military bases. The protagonist calls it one of her favorite places, and recounts how seven years ago they had ended up taking an unexpected trip to the Brecklands. That day, she had forced herself to get up early and come out into the Brecklands. She had wanted to get away from the stress of having been cooped up for so long at her university. She wasn't aware of it at the time, but it eventually hit her that she was going out because she was looking for Goshawks.

Goshawks, she explains, are a rare type of hawk. Many people have claimed that they have seen them, but the protagonist writes that they were just getting confused by the much smaller and more common sparrowhawk. Goshawks are so rare because they were at one point driven to extinction. In the mid 1900's falconers started to import Goshawks from other continents to bring them back into England. The protagonist spent several hours that day looking for the hawks. She thought back to her childhood where she would go out with her father looking for birds. She was incredibly impatient and constantly fidgeted, but her father taught her about patience.

The protagonist spent several hours in the Brecklands. Her patience paid off and she was able to spot a pair of Goshawks flying in the air. She returned home, taking a piece of reindeer moss with her. The moss was a reminder of the patience her father had taught her about. No matter what happened to the moss, it was able to endure, patiently waiting and eventually recovering. Three weeks later, the protagonist hears from her mother that her father has passed away.

Chapter 2

The protagonist is shocked at the news of her father's death. She had her friend, Christina over. The two had plans for dinner, and the protagonist insists that they still go. Once they get there, she can't eat. When the waiter finds out, he brings her a specially made cake with ice cream that has a piece of mint on top. The protagonist thinks back to her father and after dinner decides to go out to Hampshire where her family lives. She thinks back to a project her father had. He wanted to take pictures of all the bridges in Thames, something that she helped with. Her father wasn't just her father, but also her friend. The family had to track down his car that was filled with his photography equipment and press passes after he died. The attendant they called was sympathetic, but they still had to bring in a copy of the death certificate to avoid any fees.



The protagonist writes about the time right after she'd returned home after the funeral. For the next few months she was devastated by the loss of her father. She felt like she could feel him at times, and she knew that her brain was making strange connections. She tried to get in a relationship, but it ended poorly because she was still damaged from the loss of her father. She thought about how when she was working at a bird of prey center, a goshawk had been brought in. It was an older bird that had been brought in after getting injured during a hunt. They checked it over and it turned out to be fine so they released it. The protagonist felt a connection to the bird, and she felt like it was far more important than she was.

Analysis

Chapter 1

The basic idea of Goshawks is introduced in the first chapter, which covers what the majority of the plot will revolve around. The protagonist also gets the chance to show how experienced and knowledgeable she is with falconry. The setting is also established right away, with the protagonist making it clear that the story takes place in England. Her relationship with her father is established as well. Not only is the strength of that relationship set up, but also the central conflict and inciting action of her father passing away.

The first theme is demonstrated in this chapter as well, which is patience. Despite being the first theme introduced, it is actually one of the more subtle themes. Helen will occasionally look at the reindeer moss which reminds her of the lesson that her father taught her. Besides that, Helen herself doesn't recognize it again until much later in the book where she realizes that she had been acting very impatiently in trying to deal with her grief, which was causing her problems.

Chapter 2

The protagonist's relationship with her father is once again established in this chapter. It's important that the author stresses this relationship because it helps the reader understand why she was so hurt and why she acts the way she does later on. Christina is introduced in the chapter. She serves an important role throughout the rest of the book as she is one of the prime supporters of the protagonist. The rest of the chapter highlights how much the protagonist is struggling. Her struggles are the primary conflict throughout the book and start to get explored in much more detail as time goes on.

What is also important to note, here, is that the protagonist has not divulged her name. Everything around her has a name, and therefore, a personality, a resonance, but she does not. It is as if she feels that she is removed and separate. That she doesn't matter anymore.



Discussion Question 1

Discuss the symbolism of the reindeer moss.

Discussion Question 2

How did the reindeer moss also act as a foreshadowing event?

Discussion Question 3

Why does the protagonist's father's death impact her so heavily?

Vocabulary

buoyant, bewildered, wincing, bereavement, blithely, matte, eccentric, gruesomely, disarticulated, scalded, charred, translucent, eschew, atrociously



Chapters 3-4

Summary

Chapter 3

The protagonist thinks back to when they were twelve. Her parents had taken her to spend time with a group of six falconers who had their own Goshawks. She quickly felt out of place amongst the falconers. Even though she wanted to be one when she grew up, she knew she wouldn't be like these gruff men. Several of them had to be left behind because their Goshawks didn't want to come back. This wasn't uncommon behavior and the men seemed rather patient about the whole ordeal.

The main character also witnessed the Goshawks hunting, something which unnerved her. She was more interested in falcons, because she considered them to be a more elegant species of bird. After her father passed away she found herself thinking more about hawks, like she was drawn towards them. After a bit of research, she found a breeder that was selling a small one in Scotland.

She goes to talk to her friend, Stuart, who is an expert on Goshawks. He talks about how hard they are to tame, but she is still determined to get one. Back at home, she starts to obsess over a book about Goshawks. When she was younger, she was obsessed with birds and always knew that she would grow up to become a falconer. She read every book she could get her hands on. The Goshawk was one of those books, but it seemed strange to her because it wasn't written by an expert and seemed to be more about how the man failed to tame the Goshawk. She dismissed the book when she was younger as other bird authors didn't seem to think much of the book, either.

As an adult, she recognizes that the book isn't as bad as she thought when she was a child. It was written by T. H. White, who turned out to be a relatively famous author. She still dislikes it because of the way that it made hawks look. The author made it sound like hawks were monsters, that taming them was like a battle. The protagonist is determined to prove that the author is wrong.

Chapter 4

The chapter opens with a point of view switch to White's journals, written in the present tense from the 1930's. He discusses how he was a respected teacher, but he was plagued with personal problems. He was ashamed that he was a homosexual and had to keep this hidden from his peers. He tried to see someone whom he thought might have helped, and now he wants to quit his job and run off with a barmaid. The view changes again and shifts to White's friends discussing him. His students respected him because he was such an unusual teacher. He wasn't strict and came off as very



relatable and caring about his students. Like the protagonist, he was also fascinated with birds at a young age.

When he passed away in the 60's, his friends were worried about having his journals published. They didn't want anyone to look down upon their friend. The view again shifts back to the main character who is reflecting on what she read. She is training her own hawk at the time. She is curious to know more about White, to find out what kind of man would try to train a hawk that he seemed to hate. She recognizes that White was hurt, just like she was. They both want to escape into the wild and get away from the world.

The protagonist speaks from the present about how this is her story and not the story of Terence Hanbury White. She goes on to say that this isn't his story, but he's still a part of it. While she was training her hawk, she felt like she was having conversations with the deceased White. His life disturbed her, but she also saw that he had a love for nature.

The view shifts back to the books. White didn't consider any animals he owned to be pets, because that implied there was a dependency, something that he was afraid of. He wanted his pets to be able to survive on their own without needing him. As time went on, he became more disturbed. He started to drink more and realized that he hated people and preferred the company of animals. Part of his hatred of men stemmed from his fear of war that people created. He started to have disturbing dreams about the horrors of war.

White started to read about Goshawks. He learned about a Goshawk that became feral when the trainer had tried to tame it. White was fascinated with the Goshawk, admiring the way that it fought to be free after it was captured by the trainer. He wanted one immediately. He wanted to teach the hawk and himself, so they could both learn about being free and ferocious. He wanted to write a book about his experiences. He thought when the war came and the cities were destroyed, he and his hawk would peacefully live in nature, away from the horrors of man.

Analysis

Chapter 3

The theme of Gender Equality is demonstrated in this chapter for the first time. Gender is something that is explored a few times throughout the book, with the protagonist firmly establishing that despite falconry initially being something that only men tended to do, women are just as capable. The nature of Goshawks is explored in more detail, which helps to foreshadow some of the experiences that the protagonist, herself, goes through when she's training her own hawk. The theme of patience is also demonstrated, very briefly through the other hunters, though the protagonist doesn't linger on it for very long. The hunters suggest that experience teaches good falconers to have patience, something they believe women don't have in ample supply.



The protagonist brings up her love of books as well, something which continues to come up throughout the rest of the story. She frequently quotes other authors, especially T.H. White who is also introduced in this chapter. White ends up being something of a secondary protagonist since the protagonist frequently references White's book. His journey is very similar to the one that she goes through, and both ultimately end up trying to use their relationships with their hawks to try and work through their grief.

Chapter 4

Despite being deceased during the actual story, White is mentioned far more than any other character outside of the main protagonist. Both White and the protagonist follow similar paths, using their falconry as a way to try and deal with their grief. Their grief is based around different things, but there are some areas where they overlap. White's problems are covered very loosely in this initial chapter and then individually explored much later throughout the rest of the story, usually in smaller segments. This chapter is unique in the sense that White is the primary focus. In later chapters small portions of his book or life are explored, but he never gets quite as much attention as in this chapter. The theme of Grief takes center stage as it is explored in its initial phase, which is denial and isolation.

Both White and the protagonist end up wanting to retreat into the wild because they develop a fear of humanity. This fear is just as much about themselves as it is other people, and symbolically is their retreat from themselves. To face humanity is to come to terms with the loss, and this is not something that the protagonist is ready to do yet. The stage of grief that she is in, which is isolation, and the next phase, anger, will occur in this chapter and the next. This introduces quite a few different themes that will be explored in much greater detail throughout the rest of the book, most notably the impact of grief on the living. Both White and the protagonist try to run away from their problems, something which is ultimately shown to only add to their suffering. White frequently tries to hide his true nature, something which is another theme that's explored later in the book, largely through the sections that focus on White. Through both White and the protagonist, the dangers of letting grief control their lives is covered, which is again hinted at through White's introduction.

Discussion Question 1

What does the author seem to be saying about the initial impact of grief on the bereaved?

Discussion Question 2

Discuss the symbolism of the goshawk, and why the protagonist determined that this would be the bird for her.



Discussion Question 3

Why does the protagonist identify with T.H. White so much?

Vocabulary

vermiculated, kindred, fractious, chivalric, aristocracy, serene, malevolent, sadism, subterfuge, disdain, pretension, insubordination, lavished, morose, poignant



Chapters 5-6

Summary

Chapter 5

The protagonist and her friend, Christina, travel up to Scotland so she can purchase her Goshawk. The night before they stayed at a hotel where the protagonist started to make jesses, a leather arm strap that hawks could perch on. While she worked, she thought about her twin brother that hadn't survived childbirth. She wondered if her fascination with birds had something to do with that, that she was trying to make a connection to make up for that initial loss. Thinking about her brother made her think about her recently deceased father, which once again made her sad.

The protagonist switches topics suddenly, and reflects on how difficult it is to breed Goshawks. Their violent nature makes it hard to predict when they will actually mate. Exposing them to a female at the wrong time could easily result in the two fighting instead of mating. When she meets with the breeder, he tells her that he brought two birds because he is selling another. She intends to get the older one, but after meeting the younger goshawk, she feels more of a connection with it. The older one is overwhelmingly big, male, and had a wild look, something that she doesn't think she can deal with. She pleads with the breeder, who agrees to let her have the smaller, younger, female hawk instead.

Chapter 6

The protagonist drives home with her new bird, reflecting on how difficult it might be to train. She thinks more about how hard it was to lose her father, and how she had been looking to reinvent herself and find replacements for him. She feels this desire was part of what encouraged her to get the hawk in the first place. She momentarily thinks back to White's book. He talked about how when he was younger he was plucked away from his home and sent to a cruel religious school where the students were frequently beaten. He compared that to what it must have been like for his hawk, being plucked away from its home and sent to a completely new and terrifying environment. The story jumps ahead to an adult White getting his home ready, creating a special spot for his hawk in the barn. The protagonist returns home with her hawk and spends the evening dreaming about what her father was like when he was younger.

Analysis

Chapter 5

The protagonist touches upon the loss of her father, and also mentions the loss of her twin brother. This helps to explain why she wanted to be a falconer, since she was trying to make up for the connection she lost when she was born. It also explains why she's so



interested in getting a Goshawk, to make up for the missing connection with her father. While she's exploring these thoughts, the protagonist is making jesses, which further symbolizes the connection she's searching for. Jesses are the ties that are bound around the hawk's legs, and allow the falconer to have greater control when holding the bird. It connects the falconer, physically, to the bird. This represents her need to connect directly with her father, and her brother, and eventually, with herself.

The violent nature of Goshawks is explored in this chapter as well. The protagonist is initially scared about raising Goshawks because of how wild and violent they are. This wildness is part of their appeal and something that both the protagonist and White are fascinated with. Hunting with the Goshawk is what the protagonist uses to try and escape from her problems. She's later shown to be suffering except for the times that she's out enjoying the primal thrill of the hunt. This is something that White tries to capture as well, although his experiences are different since he's not as experienced as the protagonist is.

Chapter 6

More of White's background is explored in this chapter. His cruel upbringing is an important part of understanding how and why he became the man he is later on in life. Just like with the protagonist, his difficult experiences are what encouraged him to get a Goshawk in the first place. As the protagonist points out early on in the chapter, both she and White were trying to use their hawks to replace people in their lives. They were both trying to reinvent themselves as well. Two important themes are demonstrated in this chapter.

First, there is the theme of Being Oneself, which the protagonist clearly realizes she has never been, and then there is the parallel to White who was also not living true to his own nature. Secondly, there is the theme of Facing One's Fears. When the protagonist admits that both she and White were using hawks to run away and avoid the things that threatened to overwhelm them, she is acknowledging and demonstrating this theme. It is as if intellectually she is well aware that she, and White, are avoiding facing their fears, but on an emotional and visceral level, she can't bring herself to do anything else.

Discussion Question 1

What are some of the similarities between the protagonist and White?

Discussion Question 2

Discuss the symbolism of the jesses.

Discussion Question 3

How did White relate to his Goshawk's early training?

Vocabulary

malevolent, grimacing, belligerence, jesses, panoply, precipitous, amalgam, exasperation, parlance, annealed, chided, bewildered, acolytes, bureaucratic



Chapters 7-8

Summary

Chapter 7

The protagonist wakes up the next day feeling like the house is wilder because of the hawk. She starts to train the hawk to sit on her arm. The hawk is terrified about being in a new home. She reflects on how she needs to not only be patient, but she has to act as if she is invisible. She notes that this is good for taming birds, but not good for her personal life. She keeps sitting with her hawk, waiting for it to eat the food that she has provided for it. While she waits, she thinks back to her father. She remembers how he told her that he dealt with his fear during dangerous jobs by simply looking through the lens of his camera to keep himself from thinking about it. It felt like he was outside of it all when he was just viewing the world through his lens. She wonders if she used that same mechanism in her life after he passed, which is why she feels so distant from everything.

The hawk, whom she's named Mabel, doesn't eat the food so she gives up for the night. The next day she tries again. The hawk seems a little calmer this time around. The hawk even forgets about the protagonist, jumping in surprise at one point when it realizes that she is still there. This pleases the protagonist in a twisted way because she enjoys feeling forgotten by the hawk.

Chapter 8

The protagonist reflects on White's first attempts to tame his hawk. He made the mistake of giving it too much food. The hawk was overfed and started to deny the food, but White mistakenly believed the hawk hated him, so he kept trying. This created a very vicious cycle between him and the hawk. White saw training the hawk as therapeutic. To him, the hawk was like him as a boy, and he was the teachers from his past. Instead of being cruel though, he was ensuring that the hawk was taken care of. White had few books about raising hawks, but one of them was by Edmund Bert. He was fascinated with Bert, and admitted to wanting to impress Bert with how he raised his falcon, despite the fact that Bert was long since deceased. White barely slept and spent all of his time with the bird, trying to tame it.

Both the protagonist and White are fascinated with tragedy. The protagonist discusses how many hawk tamers liked to imprint personality traits on their hawks. To them, hawks are the embodiment of manly behavior, the behavior that they themselves want to show, but can't because they need to be proper gentleman. White had poured all his negative traits into the hawk. Trying to tame the hawk was like his own attempt to tame himself, which is why it nearly drove him to madness.



Analysis

Chapter 7

Patience, as a theme, is demonstrated briefly once again when the protagonist is first training her hawk. She talks about how much she enjoys being invisible as well, which begins her journey into wanting to hide away from humanity. Just like White, she starts to hate humanity and does everything she possibly can to avoid people. This hate eventually turns into a type of paranoia where she can't even stomach the idea of having basic conversations with people. Grief, one of the major themes in the novel is demonstrated when the protagonist, like White, doesn't want to be around people because she wants to try and run away from her sorrow. This is foreshadowed by the way that she gets a twisted sense of satisfaction from being ignored by the Goshawk.

The protagonist starts to learn that taming a hawk isn't quite as complicated as the books make it out to be. All of the books that the protagonist read talked about how unpredictable Goshawks were, but she's starting to see that her hawk isn't as fierce as the books suggest. While Mabel is still certainly a bird of prey, there's much more to her than that. This is touched upon later on in the book when the protagonist starts to play with her hawk, wondering if nobody ever tried before because they all assumed Goshawks were just violent hunting birds. This also parallels a shifting in perspective for the character, in that she is beginning to think that there might be another way to view her grief and her loss.

Chapter 8

White's inexperience with training hawks has been mentioned before, but it is shown for the first time in this chapter. He keeps trying to make his hawk like him by giving it food, not realizing that this is actually bad for the hawk. White is desperate for the hawk to like him because he doesn't have any other connections in his life. He was deep in denial about his true orientation, so he wasn't ever able to find love. He was trying to make up for that lost connection by forming a loving bond with the hawk, just like how the protagonist is trying to use her hawk to replace her lost connection with her father. White's fascination with Bert is also very similar to the fascination that the protagonist has with White.

Both White and the protagonist imprint their traits on their hawk, although this hasn't yet happened for the protagonist. By talking about it with White she's foreshadowing her own journey that occurs later on in the story. Both the characters also share a fascination with tragedy, something that occasionally gets referenced whenever the protagonist thinks back on some of the books that she read. It could also be seen as foreshadowing the later problems that plague the protagonist.

Discussion Question 1

What mistake does White make, initially, with his hawk, and why was this a bad thing?



Discussion Question 2

Discuss the theme of grief as it appears in Chapter 7.

Discussion Question 3

What does the protagonist learn about Goshawks that isn't in the books she's been reading, and what significance does this have on her personal life?

Vocabulary

interrogatory, portends, rudimentary, luxuriant, coercion, incrementally, bulwark, petrified, wheedling, inimical, excursion, empathized, cantankerous, arrogate



Chapters 9-10

Summary

Chapter 9

The protagonist marvels at the beauty of her new hawk, how it is made to hunt. She spends the next two days with the hawk, initially confused as to why it isn't trying to resist. At first she worries it might be sick, but she quickly realizes it is just doing what any baby hawk would do. Just like White, the protagonist is starting to project her own personality onto her hawk. She admires the way that the hawk is completely indifferent to human life, which is what the protagonist wants to be. The protagonist studies her hawk intently over the next few days, trying to feel and understand all of her reactions.

Some time later, Christina visits the protagonist. At first she is annoyed to have her friend over, but she uses the opportunity to introduce the hawk to someone else. The hawk seems relaxed even with a stranger in the room. While they are watching television, the hawk finally eats from the protagonist's glove. She is surprised and a little annoyed because she thought the hawk was supposed to learn this while they were alone together, not in the daylight when other people were around. The next few days the protagonist continues to feed her hawk and get it to trust her. She reflects on the fact that hawks need a good, strong name. White had named his hawk Gos, but he kept trying to give it names of famous writers which she found amusing and very out of place for a bird of prey. She decides that she likes the name Mabel that she's given her hawk, that it suits her. It is at this point that the protagonist finally says her own name, identifying herself as Helen.

Chapter 10

Helen reflects on the problems that White had with his hawk. He was growing frustrated by the fact that the hawk wasn't eating when he wanted. He tried to starve the hawk and keep it awake for long periods so it would have to grow attached to him. He ultimately never ended up doing any of that to Gos. He always caved, so the hawk was never tamed. She kept reading his book and always felt something different. She could easily imagine Gos, but could never really imagine White, even with the reference pictures she had.

At first, Helen is pleased with the progress she is making with her hawk. That soon changes when she can't get the hood back onto Mabel. Mabel no longer finds the hood comforting because she doesn't need to hide from anything. She has gotten used to Helen and her surroundings. Helen keeps trying to get the hood on, but she is forced to give up. About an hour later, Stuart shows up to examine Mabel.

Helen is surprised to find that Stuart is proud of the progress that she and Mabel have made. Mabel doesn't react at all when Stuart brings out his dog. He stays for a little



while longer, and when he leaves Stuart encourages Helen to take Mabel out, as that will be the next step in her training. At this point, the story jumps to a week or so in the future. Helen brings Mabel outside, who seems curious to examine her new surroundings. Helen is worried about going too far with her. She is worried about how strangers will react to seeing Mabel, and she doesn't want her to become overwhelmed. While Mabel seems fascinated with the outdoors, all Helen wants to do is retreat back inside.

Analysis

Chapter 9

The protagonist, now identified as Helen, once again learns that there's more to Goshawks than her books suggest. She thought her hawk would be fighting her all throughout her attempts to tame it, but once it gets comfortable around her it really doesn't offer any resistance. The theme of Facing One's Fears is demonstrated in the chapter as Helen admires how indifferent the hawk seems to be to human life, something that Helen craves because all she wants is to escape the pain of losing her father. Her irritation with humanity begins to shine through when she's initially annoyed that Christina, her best friend, comes by to visit her. Helen even gets annoyed when her Goshawk seems to accept humanity because it's something that she's trying so hard to avoid at this point.

The importance of names is touched upon in this chapter. Not only are the Goshawks named, but Helen finally identifies herself. Part of why Helen has never used her name before is because she didn't want to be a person; in effect, she's lost herself. She was already trying to retreat into the wild, where names have no meaning. Using her name is a step towards acknowledging her humanity, her shifting in perspective, and coincides well with the fact that Mabel has become tame and, just in general, isn't as wild as the books indicated. Helen still isn't ready to face her problems head on. She might be accepting her humanity now, but as time goes on she'll retreat more into the wild, especially when Mabel begins hunting.

Chapter 10

Helen frequently worries about how her training with Mabel is going. Despite how much progress she makes, she constantly feels like she's failing in one way or another. This has come up before when Helen was first trying to tame Mabel, but is much more prominent now. Stuart is there to tell her that she's actually making good progress with her hawk. If Helen didn't have Stuart around, there's a good chance that she would have ended up just like White. White lacked anyone with experience to help him, so he could never follow through on difficult, but effective techniques.

Mabel, not wanting to wear the hood, isn't a failure on Helen's part. Mabel doesn't want to wear the hood because she's fascinated by the world around her, and isn't looking to hide any longer. She feels safe. Helen wants to hide the world from the bird because



that's what she imagines Mabel wants. This is because Helen herself wants nothing more than to hide from everything. She is projecting her personality onto the hawk. Helen desperately wants to wear a symbolic hood and shut out the world. Mabel is teaching Helen the foolishness of this action and resists the hood. To wear a hood is to miss life, to miss all of the interesting things going on around a person (or hawk) and Mabel fights with everything she has to not wear the hood. This is the real reason why she's so hesitant to take Mabel out into the wild. She knows that they'll attract attention whenever they pass by anyone. Again, if it weren't for Stuart, Helen would likely just stay inside and not give Mabel the proper treatment, just like White.

Discussion Question 1

Why does the author wait until Chapter 9 before revealing the protagonist's name?

Discussion Question 2

Discuss the significance of the hood.

Discussion Question 3

Who is Stuart and what is his significance to Helen?

Vocabulary

innate, dismember, irresolution, inversely, contemptuous, litany, intermittent, delusional, caustically, irrigated, fervently, obliterate, preen, hubris



Chapters 11-12

Summary

Chapter 11

Helen starts to bring Mabel outside more frequently. Mabel reacts well to everything, but Helen is initially a mess. She protectively tries to keep Mabel away from anything, worried how she'll react when seeing people. Helen feels like she's seeing the world through Mabel's eyes because it's the first time she's been out in the house. She returns home, worried about overexposing Mabel. On their way home, a jogger surprises them. Helen is angry at first, but the jogger quickly apologizes and Helen realizes that he's just a normal man and wasn't there to cause distress. Mabel is initially surprised, but quickly calms down as well. Helen continues to take Mabel out, who is fascinated with the outdoors. She's starting to notice other, smaller animals, as if considering them as prey.

Helen compares her trips with Mabel to the ones that White took with Gos. White took out Gos because that's what his books said, but Gos wasn't ready for that. White saw that Gos was afraid, but White thought he had to overcome this, just like White himself tried to do. Just like Helen, White saw the world through the eyes of his hawk. Back in the present, Helen thinks about how hard it was the day after her father died. Her mother was given his camera which contained the final image that he took before passing away, something that Helen never wanted to see again.

Chapter 12

Helen teaches Mabel how to jump, something which pleases her immensely. She keeps taking Mabel outside. People occasionally come up and speak to her, eager to see Mabel. Helen speaks with an older man from Kazakhstan named Kanat. He asks Helen where she's going to take him hunting and she tells him that she knows of a farm a few miles out. Helen notices that the only people who seem to ask to see Mabel are outsiders. She decides that she and Mabel are now outsiders themselves, but she doesn't mind. Feeling more confident, Helen decides to take Mabel to see one of her friends. She's disappointed that her friend isn't there, but ends up speaking to her husband, telling him all about Mabel. He remarks that training Mabel must have been so easy because they were both women. Helen is offended by that, not believing her gender has anything to do with the training.

Helen returns home and starts to do more research on Goshawks. All the books talk about how hard they are to tame, how they can be sulky birds of prey. After reading, Helen ends up playing with Mabel using a piece of rolled up paper. She's surprised at how playful Mabel is, since the books never mentioned that. She wonders if nobody wrote about it because nobody had ever tried to play with Goshawks before.



Helen goes back to reading the book about Goshawks. She theorizes that one of the reasons White might have taken to being a falconer is because of his repressed desires. He saw it as a way for him to connect with all of these other men, something that he kept denying himself. White even once wrote about meeting another falconer and feeling like the two had a connection, that they could converse without even using words. Helen talks about how holding a hawk can make their owners feel like they're traveling through history. She felt this too, but she knows that she didn't want Mabel to feel special. She wanted to train Mabel to try and make everything disappear.

Helen takes Mabel out once again, and the two end up watching the joggers going back and forth. Helen decides to test Mabel again, seeing if she would be willing to jump onto her arm while they were outside. She is worried that it will be harder to do outside, but Mabel happily jumps up onto her arm with no problem.

Analysis

Chapter 11

Both White and Helen want to see the world through the eyes of their hawks because they are having trouble with humanity. Mabel is initially a little surprised around people, but ultimately relates well to them. Helen on the other hand doesn't want to see people at all. She constantly uses Mabel as an excuse for why she wants to avoid people. She gets very snappish around people, although her anger doesn't usually last long. Helen quickly calms after being surprised by the jogger, even though she was doing everything she could up until that point to avoid people.

While Helen is being overprotective, White wasn't being protective enough. He wanted Gos to face his fears because it was what White himself wanted to do. White had never been able to face up to his abusers, or come to terms with his sexuality. He was trying to live vicariously through Gos. If Gos could overcome his fears of the outdoors, it would feel like a victory to White.

Chapter 12

Helen starts to feel like an outsider when she's with Mabel. This is because she's trying to disconnect herself from humanity. She doesn't want to feel like she belongs to any sort of group because that will make it easier for her to retreat into the wild. Whenever they are outside, Helen tries to hide from people because of how uncomfortable she is around them. Helen starts to play with Mabel, which not only helps her develop more of a connection with Mabel, but it also goes to show that Goshawks aren't just hunting birds.

Gender is brought up once again. Helen is offended at the idea that Mabel is bonding so easily to her just because they are the same gender. As she points out, that has nothing to do with anything, especially since they aren't even the same species. Mabel probably doesn't even register that they share the same gender. To a lesser extent, gender comes into play with White as well. White was someone who struggled with his feelings



for men. By training falcons, he felt like he was making some sort of a connection to all of the other men that used to be falconers themselves.

Discussion Question 1

How are both Helen and White living vicariously through their Goshawks?

Discussion Question 2

How is Mabel different from Helen?

Discussion Question 3

What is Helen beginning to learn about herself and her grieving as she continues to work with Mabel?

Vocabulary

unmooring, rapt, salient, equanimity, despairing, bristling, vigilance, inconspicuous, reticence, exasperate, dubious, ghastly



Chapters 13-14

Summary

Chapter 13

Helen once again recounts some of White's writing. He had finally learned that he couldn't overfeed Gos. The hawk would fly to him when it was hungry. He tried to get Gos to perch on his arm, but Gos stubbornly refused. Helen began to focus on getting Mabel at the perfect weight for flight. Helen takes Mabel to the fields outside of Cambridge where she works. She recently turned down a job in Germany, claiming that it was because of her father. The truth was she didn't want to go because all she could think about was getting Mabel to fly. She briefly thinks about how in two months she would lose her job, her money, and even her home, but she didn't care about any of that. For a moment she doesn't recognize the area around her, something that had occasionally happened after her father died.

The moment passes and she starts her lessons with Mabel. Mabel responds well to them and is very comfortable flying short distances. Helen is incredibly happy, but when she gets home she finds herself crying. She writes it off as her getting sick or having an allergic reaction to something outside. Helen thinks back to White's attempts at taming Gos. Gos did eventually start to fly, but White was terrified when Gos flew at him. He ran away and ended up getting injured. He faced his fears and Gos eventually learned to land on him. White had always been taught that he had to be a brave and courageous man, but it was something that he struggled with. He had to learn to face his fears so Gos would be able to land on him.

Helen attends a college party where everyone is delighted with her and Mabel. She realizes that she's no longer an academic in their eyes, but instead she's become the hawk lady. She and Mabel get invited to lunch by one of her peers. She returns home and thinks back to White. White had finished one of his books called 'You Can't Keep a Good Man Down'. The book was a satirized version of his life that focused on the failings of the educational system. Writing the book was a release for White, as it was his way of giving up on his old life. The book ends with the character portraying White meeting a future version of himself who lives alone and content in the woods, away from mankind.

Chapter 14

Helen continues to fly with Mabel. She enlists the aid of Christina so she can fly Mabel even further. She's grown very close to Mabel and feels strange when she's away, even if it's only a few feet. Mabel continues to fly well, but she stops landing on Helen's arm all the time. Helen panics and calls Stuart, who tells her to just use different food. Helen is troubled by this. The next day they continue to have problems.



Smaller birds wander into the area and Mabel gets excited, clearly wanting to hunt the other birds. Helen had noticed that behavior before when Mabel was looking at a bird book. She was surprised Mabel had such strong reactions just to simple images of the birds. Christina chases the birds away and Mabel calms down. She continues to be unpredictable when she flies towards Helen. Despite what Stuart said, Helen feels like it is her fault. She begins to keep a detailed log of everything that Mabel eats as well as the wind conditions and what clothing Helen happened to wear that day. She's determined to find out what could possibly be wrong.

Helen is starting to get angry. She hates seeing people and finds that she doesn't know how to hold conversations with them anymore. When she's driving, she's constantly getting into minor accidents because she can't remember the basic shape of her car. Whenever she's away from Mabel, she becomes clumsy, like she's uncomfortable in her own body. The only time she feels like herself is when she's out flying with Mabel.

Analysis

Chapter 13

Helen is starting to reveal just how much she's given up after her father's death. Not only has she been turning down new jobs, but she gave up on her old job as well, which means that she will lose her home. Helen doesn't seem to really care about any of that, which is why readers are only now made aware. For Helen, all of these things are of little consequence because it just further gives her a reason to retreat into the wilds and avoid human living all together.

The theme of Facing One's Fears is demonstrated in this chapter, when Helen comes to the point in Mabel's training where she must let her fly free. Helen has proven very effective at training Mabel, but it's clear that she's also trying to put off letting Mabel fly free. Helen is afraid of losing Mabel because she's afraid it will feel like she's losing her father all over again. At the same time, Helen knows that she must face her fears. White was afraid, and his fear kept him from being a good falconer. Helen focuses on this aspect of his book which helps motivate her to keep on advancing Mabel's training.

Helen attends the party, but only because she is able to bring Mabel with her. At this point in the book, Helen seems unable to separate herself from Mabel, especially if it involves going out in public. The only way she can really handle people is when she has Mabel to shield herself with. People aren't paying attention to Helen, but the bird that's with her. When Helen does this she demonstrates another theme in the book, which is that of facing one's fears.

At the end of the chapter, Helen talks about White's book which was a satirized version of his life. White was also creating a perfect version of himself in the book. He had the main character run away to live in the woods because that is exactly what White wanted to do with his life, though he never really did.

Chapter 14



Helen, once again, mistakenly panics and believes that she's doing something wrong with her training. Part of this is because of how attached she's become to Mabel. She doesn't want to feel like she's doing anything wrong. Another part of her upset could come from how much she's focused on White's failures. Because of how similar their journeys are, it makes sense that she would be afraid that she was going down the same path as White.

Socially, Helen is still growing distant from everyone. She becomes increasingly angry whenever she has to socialize with anyone, and the only time she feels comfortable is when she's out with Mabel. Being with Mabel lets her focus on something, so she can run away from all of the grief in her life, which continues one of the central themes of the story. Even when Helen is with Christina, it only seems to be about Mabel.

It should be stated that Christina embodies the theme of Friendship. She has known Helen for a long time and is willing to be patient, to love Helen, and to support her in whatever way she needs in order for Helen to work through her losses. In many ways, there is a dynamic parallel between the relationship that Christina and Helen, and Helen with Mabel. Both relationships demand a great deal of patience, understanding, love, and respect for what the other is able to tolerate at the moment.

Discussion Question 1

Who is Christina, and why is she important to the story and to the main character?

Discussion Question 2

Discuss the theme of Facing One's Fears.

Discussion Question 3

How is Helen using Mabel as a buffer between herself and mankind?

Vocabulary

exquisite, thatched, pavilion, crenellated, mullioned, façade, ambivalent, paling, faltering, veering, eschew, salve



Chapters 15-16

Summary

Chapter 15

Helen gets a bell for Mabel so she can start to fly further distances without running the risk of losing Mabel. She works with Stuart to try and find out why Mabel keeps avoiding landing on her arm when they fly. Stuart says Mabel just needs to come down some and tries to reassure Helen that everything is okay. He offers to take her out to the hills the next day, hoping that being away from the college will help Mabel fly.

Back home, Helen reflects on more of White's works. He had achieved success with getting Gos to fly, but he had become scared. He felt safe as a novice because it was expected that he would fail. After his success he was no longer a novice, and his failure would be judged much more harshly. He began to sabotage himself because he was too afraid to face the prospect of failing in the eyes of his peers.

Helen and Mabel fly with Stuart the next day, but Mabel continues to fly past Helen. Stuart examines Mabel and assures Helen that she isn't doing anything wrong and Mabel is perfectly healthy. Helen feels bad and continues to blame herself, convinced that she's not taking care of Mabel properly. The next day, she has to go to London. The newspaper her father worked at is planning a memorial for him. Helen feels incredibly uncomfortable in the city and just wants to return home to Mabel as soon as possible. On the way home she realizes how much she misses her father.

The next day she tries to talk to Stuart about it, telling him how depressed she is. Stuart points out it's because she lost her father, but Helen argues that it's just the stress of raising Mabel. She didn't reveal that she had unpaid bills and spent most of the mornings and evenings crying. That day, Mabel flies right to her. Helen is delighted once again. Stuart checks Mabel's weight and decides that in her grief, Helen had just been off on Mabel's ideal flying weight. She was at it now so he assured her there wouldn't be any more issues.

Chapter 16

Helen goes back to White's book. He was trying to capture new, smaller hawks. As a young child, Helen was bothered by this. She felt like White was abandoning Gos. Helen wants to take Mabel out to fly, but the weather has been rainy and stormy lately. She doesn't want to risk flying in such conditions, but she still takes Mabel out to do light practice in the park when the weather permits. Helen spends the next few days fighting off a fever so she has to put off the flying once again. While she's recovering, she's also packing up her house, having no idea where she's going to live. All she knows is, like White, she wants to be away from people.



Analysis

Chapter 15

White's fears about being judged by his peers encourage him to purposefully mess up. He's once again running away from his problems. Instead of finding a way to face up to this judgment or improve his skills, he just looks for new ways to ignore his problems. This is exactly what Helen is doing with her own life problems, trying to ignore them by just focusing on Mabel.

Helen is forced to go into the city which makes her very uncomfortable. It isn't just that she doesn't want to be around people, but she's being forced to directly face the fact that she lost her father. It's revealed that Helen's grief has been causing more problems. Even though she's been trying to focus solely on Mabel, her grief has caused her to mess up when she tried to figure out Mabel's ideal flying weight. This is why Helen has had so many problems when she was working with Mabel.

Chapter 16

The theme of Facing One's Fears figures prominently in this chapter and is demonstrated when Helen becomes ill. Being sick, Helen has to face some of the problems in her life. She has to figure out where she's going to live, since she'll soon be losing her job. Not being able to go out with Mabel means she doesn't have any way to hide from her stress. Despite that, she isn't trying to face her problems head on. Instead, she's just thinking about how she wants to retreat further into solitude. The author is showing the consequences of burying one's head in the sand and avoiding facing life's obstacles.

White, trying to train new birds, could also be seen as a way of running away from his problems. He wasn't able to tame Gos, so instead he's trying to find easier birds to tame because he doesn't want to feel like a complete failure as a falconer.

Discussion Question 1

What events indicate that Helen is beginning to face her fears? What events indicate otherwise?

Discussion Question 2

What did White do to himself when he realized he was no longer a novice falconer? Why did this new designation scare him so much?

Discussion Question 3

Why would attending her father's memorial be both good and bad for Helen?

Vocabulary

invariable, disconsolate, venerable, coda, coalesced, obelisk, regal, recede, stagnant



Chapters 17-18

Summary

Chapter 17

Helen continues her flight training with Mabel, noting that she's almost ready to fly free. Helen had gone into town earlier and found out one of the banks was going under, so everything was chaotic. That chaos makes Helen think about how Mabel would have to start hunting and killing, something which she has mixed feelings about despite having seen hawks hunt previously before. Helen thinks back to White's work. He had become an oppressor to Gos, just like his father had been to him. He tried to make a new perch for Gos to give him more space to fly around. He was determined to make Gos love him once again, but when he went out to find Gos later that evening, he found Gos had broken free and flown away.

Chapter 18

Helen is excited to go out with Mabel. As the day wanes she gets increasingly agitated, snapping at Mabel and Christina. There has been an accident on the road which greatly slows them down. They finally reach the hill where Stuart is waiting for them. Helen is terrified when they let Mabel fly free. At first she thinks Mabel won't come back. Mabel is initially confused and she circles overhead to explore her new surroundings, but she does return to Helen when called. Even though it is successful, Helen still feels like White because she is letting her fears get the better of her, just like a novice.

Helen thinks back to White's experiences. After losing Gos, White went out in the woods to try and find him. He left food everywhere as bait. He eventually ran into Gos again, who seemed confused and miserable. Gos tried to fly down towards him, but he wasn't trained for flying in the wild so he ended up plummeting towards the ground instead.

The story switches back to Helen in the present day. Helen goes to visit her mother and drops off stuff from her old home. One of her friends has been letting her stay in his house while he was away in China. She has a hard time visiting her mother because it reminds her so much of her father. She goes to her old room where she spots a bunch of childhood books about animals. She didn't like animal stories as a child because the animals frequently died at the end. This gets her thinking about White again. White kept trying to get Gos back, but Gos wouldn't return. Part of him was happy that Gos was free, but he knew that he couldn't survive in the wild. He vowed that if Gos came back he would treat him like a partner and not just like a mere pet.

Helen goes flying with Mabel once again. Mabel hunts in the field and Helen watches. Again she panics at first, but Mabel returns to her. Helen realizes that watching Mabel hunt is addicting and like a drug to her, that hunting with Mabel was unlike anything she ever experienced before with the birds she trained.



Analysis

Chapter 17

White was once again trying to get Gos to love him. Instead of accepting the fact that he was failing as a falconer and needed help, he kept trying new things. This led to Gos getting free, which just causes White more problems. Helen is starting to accept that she needs to take Mabel out hunting. This is something that makes Helen feel uncomfortable, in no small part because she still hasn't come to terms with the fact that her father has died. Thinking about hunting makes her think about mortality, which is something that she isn't ready to do because she's still trying to run away from her problems. However, the theme of facing one's fears is directly demonstrated in this chapter, offering the reader insight into what happens when one doesn't face one's fears.

Chapter 18

Helen's fears almost get the better of her, but with the help of her friends she's able to let Mabel fly free. Helen is terrified of facing loss in her life again, which is why she wants to keep Mabel as close as possible. Fortunately, Mabel returns to her, but Helen still feels bad for letting her fears get in the way at all. Helen is again reminded of White. White's fears got the better of him and he lost his hawk, something that Helen is determined not to repeat. This signals a beginning of a change for Helen. The theme of Facing One's Fears is also presented at this point in the novel and shows the benefit and the strength that is gained when one does trust one's own ability to cope. Managing to stay sane while Mabel flew away from her, and having the resolution and relief when Mabel returned, helps Helen to realize the power of facing one's fears.

When Helen is forced to return home she once again has to face the issue of her father being gone, something that pains her greatly. On top of that, Helen is getting more and more frustrated by humanity. Even with Mabel around, she still gets very angry in the car because the traffic accident made it so it was impossible for Helen to escape into the woods. All she could do was wait, which meant being trapped and surrounded by all of those other cars. This is made all the worse by the fact that she's driving her father's car, so it makes it that much harder for Helen to avoid thinking about him.

Discussion Question 1

Why does the thought of hunting with Mabel make Helen think of her father's death?

Discussion Question 2

How does watching Mabel hunt affect Helen in positive and negative ways?



Discussion Question 3

In Chapter 18 how does Helen begin to face her fears?

Vocabulary

palpable, ravaged, wilting, municipal, reveling, visceral, quarry, inconsolably, mundane, torpid, fume, catatonic, crepuscular, fugue, imperious



Chapters 19-20

Summary

Chapter 19

Helen continues to hunt with Mabel. She worries that Mabel is getting frustrated with her because hunting with a person is much different from how hunting normally works for Goshawks. After a night of hunting, Helen has to go to an art exhibit since she's giving a speech on it in a few weeks. To her surprise, the exhibit is mostly bird themed. She laments how wild animals are becoming rarer in the world because of human activity, but she feels like she's done a good job incorporating a hawk into her life, just like Mabel has incorporated a human into hers.

At one exhibit she panics and imagines that she's seeing her father in the hospital bed. She starts to cry and finds that she can't bring herself to speak. She grasps her imagined father's hand for what she notes is the last time. The next day, she goes hunting with Mabel and runs off into the woods to pursue her prey. She feels like she is one with Mabel and imagines what it must be like to see things through Mabel's eyes. When Mabel catches her pray, Helen sits with her and feels like a mother watching her child. She once again starts to cry, not just for her father but everything else in her life.

Chapter 20

Helen thinks of White's works again. At this point in the narrative, White has been listening for any news about hawks in the area. He set non-lethal traps all over the area, hoping that he'd be able to catch Gos. When that failed, he wrote the breeder he got Gos from, hoping that he'd be able to get another hawk. He never heard back from him though.

In the present, Helen moves into her new home. She feels strange in the house because it was meant for a family and she is alone. She tries to write her father's memorial, but struggles to find the right words. She thinks about how she enjoys going out with Mabel because she gets to feel like she is nothing. Everything ceases to exist in those moments. Her mother has been calling her more, and she has to keep repeating everything because Helen is so numb to her words.

While hunting, Mabel doesn't seem to react to a plane flying overhead. Helen is surprised and impressed that the noise doesn't scare her, especially since Helen herself was startled. She watches the planes and imagines what it must have been like for her father to watch them. She realizes that planes are often associated with birds of prey. While watching the planes, she decides what she is going to say at her father's memorial service.

Helen thinks back to White's book, about how White was afraid of planes. He learned to fly because he thought it might help get over his fears of war planes. White was worried



that he became like a dictator to Gos. He was fighting his own war in his attempts to tame Gos. The forests had become his battleground. White made himself something he referred to as a grave where he laid in the woods, just waiting for Gos to possibly come by. Poachers completely ignored him because he had become invisible to the world.

Analysis

Chapter 19

Helen's depression gets worse when she has to go to the museum. Seeing the exhibit reminds her of her father, and she is forced to confront her problems because she doesn't have Mabel around to try and hide behind. Even though she comes face-to-face with her depression, Helen tries to hide. She's confronted with the idea of mortality, but all that has allowed her to do is hunt with Mabel. She's not thinking about the fact that she lost her father, but instead she's just finding more ways she can bond with Mabel and disconnect from humanity.

Chapter 20

Helen continues to show her fear towards the world, while Mabel acts fine. Helen is constantly surprised by this because she keeps projecting her fears onto Mabel. She likes to think she's being protective and her fears are based around Mabel's concern, but Mabel is the one that's comfortable, and it's Helen who can't handle humanity. Helen enjoys hunting with Mabel because she isn't part of the world anymore. All that matters in those moments is the thrill of the hunt. Seeing the planes reminds Helen of her father, and once again snaps her back into reality.

The planes are significant, here, because they represent life and connectedness. Mabel doesn't jump when the plane appears because she is fearless and knows her own strength. She trusts in it and it has not let her down. Helen does not have what the hawk has and she is humbled by the lesson that Mabel teaches her. She also thinks about her father and how he also must have watched planes. This inevitably takes her mind towards White. She shares that White had a deathly fear of planes, which symbolically means that he also feared life.

White had his own fears that he was trying to deal with. Like Helen, White was afraid of humanity. He was convinced that war was going to destroy all of civilization. White was using the wilds like Helen is to become invisible. He didn't have to face any of his fears when he was invisible because he was separated from humanity. Helen uses her hunting to hide from the world, while White was using his search for Gos to hide.

Discussion Question 1

Why does the trip to the museum increase Helen's discomfiture and depression?



Discussion Question 2

How does Helen continue to distance herself from others?

Discussion Question 3

Discuss the significance of planes in Chapter 20.

Vocabulary

demeanor, crestfallen, truculence, idiosyncratic, diminution, chastened, hearsay, penance, mesmerizing, vantage, propensity, aerodynamic, persecution, tussled



Chapters 21-22

Summary

Chapter 21

Helen keeps hunting with Mabel. She actively joins her in the hunt now, making sure that whatever she caught died instantly, not wanting it to suffer any more than it has to. Helen decides that she would rather eat meat that was caught by a hawk than the type that came from a farm where the animal was raised to be slaughtered. When she is with Mabel, she enjoys the thrill of the hunt. Whenever she has to finish off the prey though it sobers her up and makes her realize the mortality of everything around her.

In her journal, she shares about a particular instance that occurred right after a hunt with Mabel. They were returning from a hunt and saw a group of onlookers staring at a sick rabbit. Once they left, she put the rabbit out of its misery. This made her think about how more animals were getting sick because of pollution, and how the forests were suffering as well. She came to the realization that humanity was doomed as well, and feared the day that she was wiped out by a nuclear explosion. She thought about another book she read that detailed the violent nature of hawks. She never liked the book as a child because it seemed so bleak and hopeless to her. Now she has started to understand what it meant. She thinks back to White's book.

White had finally heard back about getting another hawk, but he ended up getting sick before he could get it. At the hospital, he briefly courted a nurse, Stella, but when she returned his advances he spurned her. He ended up getting many other birds, and even another hawk named Cully. Cully was hurt when she was transported. He took her out on a hunt and she managed to bring down a rabbit. White finished off the rabbit and felt a feeling of lust from getting to take out his aggressions on the rabbit.

Chapter 22

Helen agrees to bring Mabel to a bird event with Stuart. She worries that Mabel will have trouble adjusting because living in their new home meant they had been away from people. Mabel is fine, but Helen struggles with it. She eventually calms down and enjoys the company of her peers. Back at home Helen is starting to feel sick. She's withdrawn from any human company and only feels better when she's hunting with Mabel. She comes to realize that she's tried to embody all of the traits of a Goshawk and give up on her humanity. At home, Mabel latches onto her arm, cutting her deeply. Helen isn't sure why she did this and assumes it was somehow her fault. The next day they go on a hunt and Mabel injures Helen while they chased after a pheasant. Helen quickly wipes away the blood when she notices Mabel studying the wound. She collapses on the way back and has to rest. When she returns home, she feels enlightened and is able to write her father's memorial.



Analysis

Chapter 21

Helen is trying to run away from her problems, but she's constantly forced to face mortality, which reminds her of her father. Just like Helen, White enjoyed the thrill of the hunt. For him, it was a chance to feel like he actually had some power in the world. It also appealed to his sadistic side that he always tried to suppress. For once, he wasn't a victim; he was the one that was in control. This was especially important for him because of everything that happened with Stella. He was trying to do what he considered to be normal, but while doing that he was not being himself, which is one of the common themes (Being Oneself) that comes up when Helen focuses on White.

Helen briefly touches upon the dangers that are facing the environment. This time, she relates it to her fears with humanity. Just like White, Helen is starting to have fears about war. She is convinced that the world is going to end in some sort of horrible war. This could be from a mixture of the grief she feels about her father, but also the paranoia that comes from reading White's books, as well as focusing on the other dark books that talk about the violent nature of hawks.

Chapter 22

Helen once again finds herself worrying about Mabel being around people. She's just using Mabel as a shield because she's the one that's afraid of having to interact with people. Her depression is getting worse, to the point where she's barely able to function except for the times that she's out hunting with Mabel. Helen is trying to become exactly like the Goshawks that she's read about, completely missing the point that the books weren't always right. Mabel has already shown her multiple times that Goshawks are more than just solitary hunting creatures. Helen's depression is causing her problems with Mabel, which is why she's starting to get injured whenever they go out. Helen doesn't realize it at the time, but she soon comes to the revelation that Mabel is only acting out because Helen has become exactly like White when he was trying to tame Gos.

Discussion Question 1

In Chapter 21 why does White enjoy the hunt?

Discussion Question 2

In Chapter 22, how does Helen's depression end up harming Mabel?



Discussion Question 3

What revelations does Helen have about Goshawks as a group?

Vocabulary

prostrate, intervene, elegy, spurned, fidgeting, fret, vivarium, grievances, burnished



Chapters 23-24

Summary

Chapter 23

The chapter begins with Helen traveling to the memorial to give her speech. She's very nervous, but manages to push through and start telling a story about her father. During the speech, she thinks back to the night she wrote it. She was feeling concussed and almost called her father to ask him details. The story was about her father at a young age, sitting outside an airfield taking pictures of the planes and recording their registration numbers. He saw a new type of plane and managed to get a picture of it, but he was caught by the military. They destroyed his photos and let him go, but he was able to use a pencil to retrace the registration number of the plane in his notebook.

After the service, many people come up to Helen with stories about how great her father was, and how much he influenced them. Helen is initially overwhelmed, but ultimately pleased to find out that her father was as much of a legend as she always imagined him to be. When she returns home, she thinks about running away to live in the wilds until her heart has healed. She realizes that this is a dangerous mindset, and that humans aren't meant to run away and live in the wilds when things get tough. That doesn't fix anything.

She realizes that she has been blind to Mabel's needs. She has been trying to make Mabel a reflection of herself and hasn't realized that Mabel is growing from their constant hunting and thus needed more food. She is just hungry and agitated. She feeds Mabel a larger meal, which seems to please her. While Mabel eats, Helen realizes that part of why White's book always stood out to her was it was the only book where the animal didn't die at the end. She equates White losing Gos to her losing her father. It was so sudden that she didn't know how to deal with it. At first, it didn't feel like he was gone, but just that he was lost, that she might have been able to find him, just like White kept trying to search for Gos.

Chapter 24

Helen realizes that humans need companionship in their lives. She thinks to all of the other falconers that she read about. They might go out and hunt with their birds, but after the hunt they would return home and spend time with their friends and families, live normal lives. Helen didn't have that; all she had was the hunt. She decides to see a therapist, who prescribes her antidepressants after she pours her heart out to him. She spends the rest of the chapter thinking about some of the books that she read. Some of them were about tragedy, while others of them were about running away into the wild. Many of the books talked about running away to escape problems, which is what Helen was trying to do at first. Helen realizes that White was trying to do the exact same thing,



running into the woods to avoid the horrors of his past. He never actually dealt with all of the things that were plaguing him and causing problems in his life.

Analysis

Chapter 23

The day of the memorial service is a turning point for Helen. Up until then, she had been ignoring any human support. All she wanted was to run away from her problems. She used Mabel to get into the wild and focused solely on hunting. At the memorial, she didn't have Mabel to hide behind anymore. Helen had to confront the fact that her father was no longer with her. Helen was obviously hurting, but she wasn't alone. It wasn't just her family that was there to help her either. Colleagues of her father's spent the day coming up to her talking about how much of a legend her father was. One of them even told her how it was her father that inspired him to become a photographer in the first place. This is all very important for Helen because for once she isn't alone in the world and actually feels comfortable being around other people.

Helen recognizes that she was trying to run away from everything, and that it must stop. Living in the wilds wasn't going to fix her heart, she concludes. Helen also realizes that in her grief she hasn't been a good caretaker to Mabel, which is why they are having trouble. She becomes more attentive to what Mabel needs and makes sure that she is getting enough food. Helen relates the sudden loss of her father to the sudden loss that White experienced. Neither one of them were ready to lose someone so important in their life, which is why when it happened they didn't know how to deal with it and both felt so hurt and alone.

Chapter 24

Helen continues to go down the path of recovery. Talking to a therapist is a big step for her, and she ends up pouring her heart out, explaining everything that is going wrong in her life. The theme of Facing One's Fears is demonstrated in this chapter, as she's now fully aware that all she was trying to do after her father died was run away from her problems. Running away from her problems was just causing her more grief. She needed to face the pain of losing her father if she was ever going to start to recover and move on with her life. It wasn't something that she could do on her own either. Mabel did offer her some form of companionship, but the reader learns that Helen ultimately needed human companionship in her life and someone she could actually have conversations with.

Discussion Question 1

Why is the memorial service a turning point for Helen?



Discussion Question 2

What does speaking with a therapist help Helen to realize in Chapter 24?

Discussion Question 3

How is Helen different in her grieving and recovery than White?

Vocabulary

lectern, diadem, panacea, leaven, domesticity, preface, fraternity



Chapters 25-26

Summary

Chapter 25

It has been ten days since Helen began taking her medication. She feels tired, but has been offsetting that by drinking more coffee. Helen and Mabel continue to hunt together, but Helen is having a hard time seeing through Mabel's eyes like she used to. She starts to let Mabel fly a little more freely. During one hunt, Mabel gets away from her and she spends several hours trying to get her back. Mabel leads her through someone's property and she ends up hunting pheasants that belong to someone else. Helen is able to get a hold of Mabel before she does too much damage and takes her back home. Helen is starting to feel more like a human and is looking for places to rent and trying to go out more with her friends. She enjoys going to places that let her see the hill where she and Mabel hunt. She feels like the hill has become home and enjoys how much she and Mabel know the area.

Chapter 26

Winter has come, so Helen isn't able to go out with Mabel as much. When she does, she lets Mabel fly free. She loses sight of Mabel and momentarily panics that she lost her in the wilds and she'll be killed by a hunter. She quickly recovers Mabel who is perfectly fine and had just been chasing her prey into the woods. After recovering Mabel, Helen thinks about White's work. White had felt reborn after laying in the grave he created while waiting for Gos. He felt like he was returning to the world with a newfound wisdom. White was trying to recreate himself after the failure with Gos in a type of rebirthing ritual. He wanted to become a man that wasn't afraid of anything, a man that could become a legend. Helen understands this need for a rebirth, and takes courage from the knowledge that it is possible.

Analysis

Chapter 25

Helen is starting to let Mabel fly more freely. She's having a harder time getting into the hunts. This isn't necessarily a bad thing because it means that Helen isn't trying to focus solely on Mabel. Helen is having trouble finding a happy medium between her life and Mabel's, which is why Mabel is able to get away from her and cause trouble. Helen still has moments where she longs for the hunt and she likes to look at the hill that has become so familiar to her. However, she's starting to move on and embrace her humanity, searching not only for a new home, but also making more of an effort to go out with her friends.

Chapter 26



Helen is still afraid of loss. She doesn't want Mabel to suddenly be taken away from her like her father was. Even though Mabel has always come back to her, Helen still panics when she doesn't immediately return. Helen's return to humanity was very similar to the enlightenment that White found after searching for Gos. Both of them have learned from their experiences with training a hawk. They both wanted to use their hawk to escape into the wild and get away from humanity, but they both ended up learning that all they were doing was letting their fear get the better of them. They returned from their experiences ready to confront their fears and get back into humanity.

Discussion Question 1

What did White do in the woods (Chapter 26) while he was searching for Gos that had a profound affect on him?

Discussion Question 2

How has the hunt changed for Helen?

Discussion Question 3

In Chapter 25 what does Mabel do when she gets away from Helen?

Vocabulary

inundate, shoals, proffer, undulating, parabola, quixotic, cacophony, convulsive, amble, leisurely



Chapters 27-28

Summary

Chapter 27

Helen spends Christmas in Maine without Mabel. She greatly enjoys her time in the community and feels like her heart is finally healing. Her mother is with her and she gets to see several of her falconer friends. She goes hunting with them and is amazed that they are allowed to hunt in the community. She wishes that England had the same laws and regulations that America had. She goes back home and gets Mabel from Stuart and Mandy, who were taking care of her. She realizes how great her friends have been to her and thanks them for everything they've done since she got Mabel. After she gets Mabel, she thinks back to White. White was hiding in Ireland, too afraid to enlist in the war. His new hawk, Cully, had died, but he was raising other birds now. He decided to try to write another book about birds, something that would be different from all the other books out there. He felt like after everything he had gone through he had a new wisdom that would make for a unique reading experience.

Chapter 28

Helen keeps hunting with Mabel. While she's hunting, she spots a herd of deer and gets to thinking about the rich history of the English landscape. Part of her feels bad that she was trying to escape from history, and she wishes that humanity was doing more to protect and preserve beautiful spots instead of causing destruction. She returns home and goes through some of her books, finding several notebooks from her father. He would detail everything he saw about the planes when he was younger, and he and his friends liked to collect whatever odd knickknacks they could find. While she's reading the books, she finds a handwritten note from her father addressed to her. She's sad, but also realizes that after all this time she's begun to move on. She remembers the lessons about patience that her father used to teach her, and she realizes that all this time she has been impatient in trying to deal with her grief.

Analysis

Chapter 27

Helen spends Christmas in America with her close friends. This is a huge turning point for her and she finally starts to feel like her heart is mending. Not only that, but she recognizes how supportive everyone in her life has been to her. When she gets back home, she's very grateful towards Stuart and her other friends, who have always been there for her since she lost her father. The theme of Friendship is demonstrated as Helen reflects on how helpful and understanding her friends have been. Stuart especially has been a huge help for Helen since he's always been there to help her whenever she felt like she was having issues with Mabel. By letting her friends and



family into her life, Helen was able to complete her healing and start to move on from the pain of losing her father.

Chapter 28

By remembering the Reindeer Moss in this chapter, the theme of Patience is demonstrated. Helen once again remembers the lessons of patience that her father taught at the beginning of the book. Helen realizes that her problems came from being impatient. She was trying to find shortcuts to getting over her pain. If her father was alive, he would have told her to be patient, to accept the fact that it was going to take time to recover. Helen was finally starting to do that, and she was at the point where she was able to see a note written by her father without breaking down. It still hurt, but she came to understand that she has to keep on living life and can't try to run away from the pain.

Discussion Question 1

What has been one of the constants in Helen's life that has helped her in her recovery?

Discussion Question 2

What is the significance of Helen reading her father's journals?

Discussion Question 3

What did Helen learn in regards to patience and grief?

Vocabulary

egalitarian, feral, parable, covert, pedantry



Chapters 29-30

Summary

Chapter 29

Winter is over and spring is fast approaching. Helen is teaching again, but she is teaching close by. Mabel is going to have to spend spring in an aviary, so Helen wants to go on one last hunt with her while she still can. Mabel gets away from her and into a pheasant reserve. Helen is able to get her out, but she cut her thumb and Mabel had already gotten to some of the animals. She quickly goes to Stuart's house to get her thumb bandaged and explains everything that had happened. At the house, she thinks back to White.

White had moved to a new home and was starting to live a better life. One of his friends showed up and found the manuscript for the book that would eventually become the Goshawk. He convinced White to publish the book, but only if White could preface it by saying he was incredibly inexperienced and had since learned from the error of his ways. White received plenty of letters about the book, some praising it while others insulted his complete inexperience and chastised him for being cruel to Gos.

At the end of White's book, he listed all the things that Gos was to him. Helen decides she doesn't want anyone to think of Mabel as anything more than a hawk. She doesn't want to humanize Mabel. That isn't to say she doesn't care about Mabel. She is grateful to have her in her life, but she realizes that Mabel can't live as a human just as she couldn't live as a hawk. Instead, the two had to find a happy medium, sharing their experiences with one another. Helen knows that having Mabel in her life has helped her mend some of her wounds.

Chapter 30

Helen has fattened Mabel up in preparation for her trip to the aviary for molting season. She's sad that she'll have to go several months without seeing Mabel. That night, there is an earthquake and Helen panics. She runs downstairs to check on Mabel, afraid she will be terrified as well. Mabel is completely fine, having slept through the quake. This calms Helen down immensely, and she is once again grateful to have Mabel in her life. She takes Mabel to the aviary and has a difficult time saying goodbye, but she knows that in a few months she'll be able to see Mabel again, and that she'll enjoy her time in the aviary.

Analysis

Chapter 29



Helen is grateful for Mabel being in her life, but she knows now that she has to have a life outside of Mabel. At first it might seem insulting that she doesn't want to think of Mabel as anything but a hawk. What this means to Helen is that she has to live a human life on top of her life as a falconer. Mabel is a faithful companion to her, but the two can only form so much of a connection because they're different species. Just like the falconers that she read about, Helen has to have friends and family that she returns to when she isn't hunting.

By fattening Mabel up, Helen has symbolically fed her own soul and made it ready to shed its sorrow and pain.

Chapter 30

While Helen has done a lot to recover from losing her father, she still has a fear of sudden loss. When the earthquake wakes her up she initially panics, afraid that she might lose Mabel. When she gets downstairs, Mabel is completely fine which causes Helen to calm down as well. Helen agreeing to put Mabel in the aviary is a big step for her, because it means that for the next few months she won't be able to use Mabel as a shield. She'll have to face humanity head on and focus on rebuilding her career and home life.

Discussion Question 1

In Chapter 29, what does Helen determine that she will not do to Mabel that White did with Gos?

Discussion Question 2

How does Helen deal with Mabel having to go to an aviary?

Discussion Question 3

In Chapter 30 how do both Mabel and Helen deal with the earthquake, and what does this tell the reader about Helen's stability?

Vocabulary

torpid, debacle, corrugated, fractious,



Characters

Helen

Helen is the main character of *H is for Hawk* and the majority of the book is told through her viewpoint. Helen is a very inquisitive character that has always had a fascination with birds, even when she was a little child. She has an appreciation for literature as well and frequently quotes different authors throughout the book, especially T.H. White. At the start of her story, Helen is a teacher at Cambridge University. When she loses her father, she spirals into depression and ultimately gives up on her job. The only thing that she cares about is raising her Goshawk, Mabel, whom she uses as an excuse to vanish from the world.

Helen retreats into the wild and becomes angry and even paranoid whenever she has to interact with people, even her friends. She becomes terrified of losing Mabel and constantly doubts her own abilities in raising her, despite being an accomplished falconer. She becomes obsessed with Mabel's hunt, and it gets to the point where that's the only time she feels alive. After giving a speech at her father's memorial, Helen starts to realize that she needs help. She ends up seeing a therapist and along with support from her friends and family she begins to reacclimatize herself to humanity. By the end of the book, she's gotten another job and a home that she feels comfortable in.

Father

Helen's father is an important fixture of her life, and it's his death that sends her spiraling into depression. Helen's father is shown in flashbacks where he was always very supportive and caring of Helen and the rest of their family. He worked as a photographer for the press, but even when he was a young child he was fascinated with photography. At his memorial, Helen talks about how when he was younger he would take pictures of the planes flying out of military bases. He always brought his camera with him and enjoyed taking slice of life pictures outside of the ones he was required to take for work.

Mother

Helen's mother isn't quite as prominent a figure as her father. She only appears a few times throughout the book. She is shown to be just as supportive of Helen, and the two spending Christmas together is part of what sets Helen on the path of recovery. It is clear that of her two parents, Helen was closer and related more to her father. It is as if her mother had always been a secondary character, and now, without her father in the picture, she begins to realize more about her mother.



Christina

Christina is Helen's best friend. When Helen first goes to get Mabel, Christina accompanies her. She's also spends a good deal of time helping Helen train Mabel, and even goes on a few hunting trips with her. She, Stuart, and Mandy form a strong support framework for Helen, which eventually allows her to heal from her losses.

Stuart

Stuart is another one of Helen's friends, and in her words, a Goshawk expert. He frequently helps her train Mabel and addresses any problems that Helen might be having. It's with his help that Helen is able to get Mabel to return to her while she's flying free. Stuart is incredibly patient with both his birds and with Helen. He and Mandy form a strong bond that allows Helen to slowly deal with her grief constructively.

Mandy

Mandy is Stuart's wife and also a friend of Helen. While she doesn't take a hands-on approach with training Mabel, she's still very supportive of Helen and even helps take care of her when Helen gets injured during one of her hunts.

Terence Hanbury White

T.H. White is an author that Helen frequently quotes throughout the book. Despite not being alive during the main course of the story, he's arguably still one of the protagonists, as the journey in his books is very similar to the one that Helen goes through in the present.

He was raised in a very abusive environment, with both his parents and his teachers being very strict. White eventually becomes a professor, but just like Helen he is very troubled and haunted by stressful events from his past. On top of that, he's struggling with his sexual orientation and his sadistic desires.

White ends up terrified of humanity. He wants to retreat into the wild and live with his hawk, Gos. Like Helen he was fascinated with birds, but unlike Helen he wasn't experienced with raising them. His book details his failures in raising Gos, which ultimately result in him losing the bird. His paranoia and fear of the world keep him from being able to raise Gos properly. As time goes on he is able to become a falconer and learn from his mistakes with Gos. He still struggled with issues from his past, but he managed to find a sense of enlightenment after losing Gos. He originally didn't want to publish the book that Helen was reading because it showed how much of an amateur he was, but his friends eventually convinced him to do so.



White provides a litmus test in many respects for Helen, in that they both chose Goshawks, and they are both writers. White, however, suggests in his journals and books, which Helen devours, that his ineptness caused the death of several of his birds, something that Helen is determined not to do. Helen identifies with White's desire to flee humanity, to see the dark side of human nature, and for a while to give herself over to the field and forest, flight and feather. However, she differs from White in that Helen is able to pull herself free of her depression, something White never did.

Mabel

Mabel is Helen's Goshawk. Helen is surprised to find that Mabel has a playful side, and the two even have their own variation of fetch. Mabel is shown to be a very calm bird outside of the hunt, not even being disturbed by an earthquake at the end of the book, or reacting when Helen shouts at her during one of her angry fits. Later, when a jogger suddenly comes upon them, it is Helen who is startled, not Mabel.

Mabel becomes a calming influence on Helen, even if she is also her escape from reality. Eventually, it is her love for Mabel that drives Helen to reenter civilization. In many instances, Mabel is symbolic for life, for freedom, and for friendship.

Gos

Gos is the Goshawk that White tried to raise. Because of his inexperience, Gos never ended up bonding with White. White tried to give him a bigger area to explore, but Gos instead broke free and flew into the wild. White tried several times to get him back, but Gos never returned to him.

Scott and Erin

Scott and Erin are two American friends of Helen. They only appear very briefly in the book when she spends Christmas with them. Despite that, they end up being very supportive of her, and spending time with them helps her to realize how difficult things have become in her life. Because of their support, she credits them as her American family.



Symbols and Symbolism

Reindeer moss

Helen encounters reindeer moss early on in the book. She takes the moss because it reminds her of the lessons about patience her father taught her when she was a child. The moss is special because it can survive in any conditions. It patiently waits to get out of any dangerous conditions so it can recover and return to normal. The moss ends up reminding the character not only of patience, but also of her father.

Mint in the ice cream

After receiving news about her father passing away, Helen goes to have dinner with her friend. The waiter notices that she isn't eating. When he finds out what happened, he brings her a cake with ice cream on top that has a piece of mint in it. Helen takes out the piece of mint and thinks about how it was plucked from the earth and will never grow again. This makes her sad and is clearly a reminder of her recently deceased father. After dinner, she immediately heads out to be with her family because of her grief.

Apocalyptic rain

After losing her father Helen spirals into depression. She spends weeks locked away in her home. During the summer, the country is hit with what she describes as apocalyptic rain. Helen feels like the rain is a reflection of her mood. The rain washes everything away and seems to be a destructive force. This is exactly how Helen is feeling. Losing her father hit her hard and she doesn't know what to do with her life, feeling like she is just being swept away and everything is getting destroyed.

Mabel (The protagonist's Goshawk)

When Helen starts to train her hawk she realizes that she is projecting how she wants to be onto her hawk. She admires the way that the hawk seems so disconnected from human life, something that she's craving because she's still mourning her father.

She also becomes an example to Helen, of how to go on living, and eventually, instead of projecting herself onto the bird, she becomes a student of the bird, herself. For example, Mabel doesn't want to wear a standard hood that most falconers use. Mabel fought and fought, and sulked whenever it was attempted. Helen realizes that it is because Mabel likes to be a part of life, not shut off from it; that she likes to see everything around her, to experience it all.

Later, Mabel shows her what it is like to actively pursue life when they go hunting. For a while, Helen is addicted to the hunt because for the first time since her depression, she



can feel something. Later, she is able to withdraw from this and make a distinction between herself and the hawk.

At the end of the novel, Helen must take Mabel to an Aviary to spend the Spring so that she can go through her molt (a shedding of feathers). This, symbolically, is also an indication to the reader that Helen is 'molting' as well, shedding the sorrow that she's carried around for several years.

Father's car

Helen ends up inheriting her father's car after he passes away. She keeps the car filled with his old photography and press equipment. To her, the car is a direct connection to her father, and she cherishes the items inside because getting rid of them would make her feel like she was getting rid of her father from her life.

Twin brother

Helen had a twin brother that didn't survive childbirth. She didn't find out about this for several years. As an adult, she thinks back to her twin brother. Even though she doesn't remember him, she always felt like there was a missing connection in her life, which she thinks is what got her interested in birds in the first place. Her lost brother is a direct representation of that loneliness and emptiness that Helen feels, and is why she keeps trying to reach out and make bonds.

Jesses

Jesses are something that falconers make. They're a leather arm strap that allows birds to perch on their owner's arm without causing any damage. They also keep the bird from being able to fly away. Helen sees Jesses as being a symbolic representation of the connection that falconers feel with their birds. She could easily order them online, but she prefers to make them by hand since this makes her feel like the connection is more authentic, since she had to go out of her way to create the device that bonds the bird to her.

White's Goshawk (Gos)

To White, his Goshawk represented all of the traits that White himself was trying to suppress. He projected his fear of mankind and his violent urges onto the hawk. By trying to tame the hawk, he was in fact trying to tame the dark urges that he felt inside of himself and wanted to conquer. Gos was also representative of life, which in the end, wanted nothing to do with White because of White's continual desire to separate from it.



You Can't Keep a Good Man Down (White's book)

White wrote 'You Can't Keep a Good Man Down' shortly after he was able to master flight with Gos. The book was a satirical version of his life. In it, he mocked the educational system and tried to explain why he had given up on humanity and wanted to get away. For him, writing the book was like casting away his old life. The novel ends with White's stand-in meeting a future version of himself, who is finally content because he's moved into the woods and has escaped from humanity, something that White has been craving throughout the book. White only lingered in society because he was searching for love, but it was something that he could never find and just caused him pain.

Animal Books

Both Helen and White frequently read books about animals, especially birds. To both of them, these books embody a lifestyle that they were trying to limit. White didn't know how to deal with all of his desires that were considered taboo and strange at the time, so he tried to become like the men in those books. He wanted to feel normal and like he belonged. For Helen, the books served a similar purpose, which is why she had such an old fashioned approach to raising falcons. The books also represented her past, as she frequently thought back to her younger years when she first read the books.



Settings

Brecklands

The book begins in the Brecklands, a forested section of England. The Brecklands encompass a large, partially war torn area. There are a few military bases and homes scattered throughout the area. Helen and her father used to come here to watch birds, and Helen begins the book here looking for Goshawks.

Family Home

Helen's family lives in Hampshire. She makes a few visits there throughout the book and occasionally flash backs to her family home in Hampshire.

Stowe

Stowe is the university that White teaches at before he tries to become a falconer. It's usually mentioned in name only since Helen only goes over small sections of White's book at a time.

Cambridge

Cambridge is the university where Helen teaches. When she's training Mabel to fly, she uses the fields around Cambridge. Helen's home is also located around the Cambridge grounds as well, and when she loses her job she loses the home.

Country Hills

The hills are an unspecified location where Stuart takes Helen to train Mabel. Helen frequently returns to this area, sometimes with her friends and sometimes alone. This is where Mabel does the majority of her hunting.

Friend's House (England)

When Helen loses her home she house sits for a friend who will be gone for several months. The house initially makes her feel uncomfortable because it was clearly meant for a family, and at this point Helen is struggling with the concept of humanity.



Church

The memorial for Helen's father takes place at a church. She gives a very moving speech and gets to hear from her father's colleagues about how much of a legend he was.

Friend's House (Maine)

Helen and her mother spend Christmas in America. For Helen this ends up being very therapeutic and helps her recover from the trauma of losing her father.



Themes and Motifs

Patience

The theme of patience is demonstrated as early as the first chapter. Helen's father teaches a young Helen during a flashback how important it is to be patient when they're in the woods together. At the time, he was talking about it in terms of bird watching, but it is something that is prevalent throughout the rest of the book. Helen is successful in her falconry because she knows that she has to be patient. In comparison, White was inexperienced and impatient when he was training Gos. He wanted Gos to love him right away, so he tried to rush the taming process. This doomed his relationship with Gos from the start.

While Helen might be patient with Mabel at the beginning of the book, that doesn't mean she's quite learned how important patience is. The theme of patience is subtly demonstrated throughout the rest of the book in the way that Helen tries to deal with the death of her father. It isn't identified by her until the later chapters. Helen was trying to rush through the grieving process with her father. She doesn't give herself any time to try and cope with the loss, instead just trying to bury herself in hunting with Mabel.

At the end of the book Helen recognizes that grieving is something that can take time and it can be dangerous to rush through. Helen's impatience is shown a few times when she's hunting with Mabel, especially once Mabel is flying free. Helen is quick to panic any time Mabel doesn't immediately return to her. She assumes that she's doing something wrong as a trainer, but Mabel always came back to her, she was just enjoying the time she had to actually fly free. Helen was so afraid of losing someone else that she didn't give Mabel the patience she deserved, which is what caused some of their issues towards the end of the book.

Facing One's Fears

Both Helen and White are constantly demonstrating this theme throughout the book. They both want to run and live into the wild because they are having trouble dealing with humanity. They also demonstrate this theme in the way that they try to project themselves onto their hawks. Neither character is able to deal with the grief that is plaguing them. Instead of trying to face the pain and find a way to deal with it, they make their lives about their hawks and try to emulate their lifestyle.

Helen herself says several times when she's training Mabel that she admires the way Mabel is numb to human life. As the book progresses, Helen continues to try and run away from her problems. This is especially shown when Helen starts to go hunting with Mabel. Helen becomes consumed by the hunt. It gets to the point where she feels physically ill when she's doing anything except hunting. This is because Helen doesn't



have to be herself when she's out with Mabel. Instead, she tries to become exactly like Mabel, so she's no longer the girl that lost her father.

Helen is eventually forced to confront her problems. At her father's memorial she has to accept the fact that he's no longer with her. Fortunately, she has her friends and family there to lend support. This is what helps Helen pull through. When she spends Christmas in America with her family and friends she starts to realize how much she had been hurting. She begins to see a therapist and try to get involved in humanity once again. It hurts her to have to face the death of her father, but by not ignoring it she's eventually able to heal and move on with her life.

Gender Equality

The issue of gender equality is something that is mostly subtly hinted at throughout the majority of the book. The first time gender equality is really brought up is when Helen is talking about some of the history behind being a falconer. She talks about how in England it used to be considered something that gentleman did. This is one of the reasons that White was drawn towards it in the first place. He wanted to do something that he considered manly. Because of his orientation, there was also a natural appeal since it meant that he could feel closer towards those men.

In the modern day setting, Helen clearly shows that she's capable of being an experienced falconer despite the fact that she isn't a man. In fact, she even hints that because she isn't trying to live up to some sort of manly code that she's a better falconer than even some of the older experts that she learned from. Helen demonstrates this when she starts to play with Mabel. In all of the books she read, the men identified Goshawks as being vicious birds of prey, focusing extensively on their "manly" hunting qualities. Helen is able to learn more about her Goshawk because she doesn't limit herself to this old way of thinking.

Gender equality comes up one other time when Helen is talking with her friend's husband. She excitedly tells him all about the progress that she's been making with Mabel. He seems disinterested and points out that the only reason she's making progress is because they share a gender. Helen makes it very clear that gender has nothing to do with her ability to train a hawk, since it isn't even something that Mabel would register given they're two completely different species.

Being Oneself

This theme is primarily shown through the sections that focus on White, although it does apply to Helen as well. When Helen first begins to talk about White, she notes that many of his problems came from him trying to hide who he was. White was someone that struggled with his sexuality and felt like he had to be this very specific model of a man. White thought that he had to be fearless and powerful because that's what he was taught.



The problem is, White didn't want to be any of these things, which is why he tried to run away into the wild. White was praised for his teaching style, but he thought he was being a poor instructor because he wasn't acting as cruel and strict as the teachers around him. He felt like he was failing as a man because he had fears, so he tried to act fearless. White wasn't fearless, and pretending to be just caused him further stress. The theme is most prominently shown with White's sexuality. White was interested in men, but he kept trying to form relationships with women. These relationships were always doomed to failure and each time he just made himself miserable.

White isn't the only one that embodies this theme. There are times throughout the book where Helen comments that she has become exactly like a hawk, and she wants to live the lifestyle of a hawk. Helen is obviously a human though, so this is just another way that she's trying to avoid her problems. There's a long stretch of time where she tries to embrace the hawk style of living. Helen ignores the fact that she's losing her job and her home, instead only focusing on hunting and killing when she's out with Mabel. This might provide her with a temporary numbness, but at the end of the book she notes how foolish she had been because all she was doing was letting her problems build up while she pretended to be something that she wasn't.

Grief

Perhaps one of the most prominent of themes in the novel, is the theme of Grief. It acts as a tangible inciting incident, one that causes Helen to spiral into a dark place within her own soul. The various stages of grief are depicted, though not pointed out in the work. However, if one is aware of the stages they are clearly indicated as Helen works her way back to normalcy.

Her grief is shown to affect nearly every facet of her life. Grief is what causes her to lose her job, her home, and herself. It causes her to withdraw emotionally from everyone, even her mother, who had just lost her spouse. Because of her inability to constructively deal with her grief, Helen shuts down and keeps at arm's length the very people who may have helped her deal with her loss. Instead, she turns to a Goshawk named Mabel. For a time, grief keeps Helen focused only on the bird and her training, but eventually, it is that very hawk that teaches Helen about returning to life and then actually living it.

Grief is shown to be, in many ways, a purification of the soul. Helen is forced, eventually, to face all of the things about herself that she had been denying, as well as taking a hard look at what she had become. Her father's death and the resulting grief pried open many carefully constructed social and emotional devices that Helen had kept in place for decades. With them worn away, she was literally free to reinvent herself, which she eventually does.

Friendship

Helen shows many times throughout the book that everyone needs some form of human support, especially the support of friends. Even at the very start of the book,



Helen shows that she needs friendship. When she's first trying to get a Goshawk, she goes to Stuart and Mandy to get advice on how to raise it. She has Christina with her as well to lend emotional support when she drives up to Scotland to get Mabel. When Helen starts training Mabel, Christina is still there to help, even though she doesn't know anything about training birds.

When it comes to getting Mabel to fly, Helen continues to rely on her friends. Stuart helps her out when she's a little off with Mabel's ideal flying weight, and he helps her find the spot on the hill where Helen ends up feeling most comfortable flying. Helen's friends aren't just supportive with Mabel though. Everyone is very understanding of Helen's condition given that she just lost her father. They essentially let her do whatever she wants and always make themselves available, or give her space when she needs it.

The theme is most evident towards the end of the book. When Helen is at the memorial service she's initially terrified to be in front of so many people. At that point in the book, all she wanted to do was hide from humanity. Everyone is supportive of her, and she even comments that it feels like she's with family. They reassure her that her father was a legend, which makes her feel better. The theme is again shown at the end of the book when Helen and her family travel to America. Being around her friends and her family lets her heart start to mend. She's grateful for everything that Mabel has done, but she recognizes that in order to feel better she needs actual humans around her. After that, Helen starts reaching out to her friends and family more. She makes a point of thanking Stuart and Mandy for everything they've done for her, realizing how supportive they've been. The book ends with Helen determined to seek out more human contact during the next few months where Mabel is in the aviary for molting season. She's even gotten herself a new job and home because she wants to be part of humanity again.



Styles

Point of View

H is for Hawk is told from the first person perspective of the protagonist, Helen. The first section of the book is primarily told in the form of a flashback, with Helen directly narrating her thoughts and experiences to the audience. Every so often she will interject a thought in from the present. About a third through the book, the flashback catches up to the present. From there on out, the majority of the book is told in the present tense. Helen will frequently recite passages from books. When she does that, she directly quotes the passages. It's still being read from Helen's point of view, but some quotes will be from the perspective of the author, usually followed by Helen then giving her own thoughts on what she just read.

Because the book is told from Helen's point of view, her thoughts can be rather erratic. Sometimes she'll take notice of some small detail and then suddenly jump to another topic entirely. Helen is very vague about the passage of time. Even when the story is being told in the present, there are still times where she will suddenly flashback to another event entirely. Sometimes the flashbacks last for a few sentences, while other times they could last for longer segments.

Language and Meaning

Helen tends to use a very sophisticated vocabulary which reflects the fact that she teaches at Cambridge University. Because she's born in England and most of the book takes place there, Helen uses a very distinct vocabulary. She frequently uses very specific falconer terms as well, but she at least takes the time to explain to the reader what the term means. For example, when she first gets Mabel she uses the term "bates" over and over to refer to the act of Mabel diving towards the ground. Helen's vocabulary also has an older air of sophistication to it. This is because she spends a lot of time reading books that are rich with English history. This is specifically shown whenever Helen quotes books from the 1800's and early 1900's.

Helen will frequently use writing from other authors to get across her point. She almost never speaks throughout the course of the book, choosing to instead summarize conversations. This helps to highlight the chaotic state that she's in. By using works from other authors she's able to give the readers some insight into her emotional state, even if she isn't outright stating how she feels.

Structure

The structure for H is for Hawk is a little chaotic. The first few paragraphs are told from the present perspective, but then the next third of the book is primarily told through flashback. On top of that, Helen will frequently break away from her story to either talk



about a piece of literature that she read, or directly quote it. The majority of some chapters consist solely of works from other authors, most notably T.H. White. Sometimes Helen will interject her own thoughts into these sections. Whatever she is quoting usually highlights a lesson she is about to learn, or just parallels a certain part of her life. For example, with White his writing usually mimics the emotional state that Helen is in at the time.



Quotes

And partly because a decade before, Dad had invented a gloriously eccentric weekend side-project. He'd decided to photograph every single bridge over the Thames. I went with him, sometimes, on Saturday mornings, driving up into the Cotswolds. My dad had been my dad, but also my friend, and a partner in crime when it came to quests like this.
-- Helen (Chapter 2 paragraph 6)

Importance: The driving conflict throughout the book is how Helen deals with the grief of losing her father. This passage is important because it highlights very early on just how strong Helen's connection was with her father, which explains why she takes his loss so hard.

And the rain continued, burying the streets in half an inch of bubbling water, breaking shop canopies, making the River Cam a café-au-lait surge, thick with broken branches and sodden undergrowth. My city was apocalyptic. 'I don't see the weather as odd at all,' I remember saying to a friend under a café awning while the rain struck the pavement behind our chairs with such violence that we sipped coffee in cold mist.
-- Helen (Chapter 2 paragraph 12)

Importance: The start of Helen's depression is highlighted in this section. It shows how hard she's taking the loss of her father, and marks the beginning of her depression.

The book you are reading is my story. It is not a biography of Terence Hanbury White. But White is part of my story all the same. I have to write about him because he was there. When I trained my hawk I was having a quiet conversation, of sorts, with the deeds and works of a long-dead man who was suspicious, morose, determined to despair. A man whose life disturbed me. But a man, too, who loved nature, who found it surprising, bewitching and endlessly novel.
-- Helen (Chapter 4 paragraph 11)

Importance: Helen frequently references White throughout the book. Chapter 4 is primarily all about setting him up and explaining who he was. It's important for readers to understand why she frequently references White and his works.

When you are broken, you run. But you don't always run away. Sometimes, helplessly, you run towards. My reasons weren't White's, but I was running just the same.
-- Helen (Chapter 5 paragraph 1)

Importance: Chapter five begins with Helen talking about how she was trying to run away from her problems, just like White. This sets up one of the major themes of the book and is very strongly emphasized at the start of this chapter.

When I found out about my twin many years later, the news was surprising. But not so surprising. I'd always felt a part of me was missing; an old, simple absence. Could my obsession with birds, with falconry in particular, have been born of that first loss? Was



that ghostly kestrel a grasped-at apprehension of my twin, its carefully drawn jesses a way of holding tight to something I didn't know I'd lost, but knew had gone?

-- Helen (Chapter 5 paragraph 6)

Importance: Helen feeling like a part of her is missing is a big driving force for why she acts in such a grief stricken way throughout the book. It explains why she gets so into her training with Mabel, and also emphasizes the symbolic nature behind her jesses.

Sitting there with the hawk in that darkened room I felt safer than I'd done for months. Partly because I had a purpose. But also because I'd closed the door on the world outside.

-- Helen (Chapter 7 paragraph 15)

Importance: Helen is starting to retreat away from humanity. She feels safe in a darkened room because she cut herself off from the rest of the world. She's no longer focused on anything in her life, instead putting everything into taming Mabel.

Then came a decisive moment. It was not the one I was hoping for, but it was thrilling all the same. Regarding the room with simple curiosity, she turned her head and saw me. And jumped. Jumped exactly like a human in surprise. I felt the scratch of her talons and her shock, too, cold and electric. That was the moment. Until a minute ago I was so terrifying I was all that existed. But then she had forgotten me. Only for a fraction of a second, but it was enough. The forgetting was delightful because it was a sign that the hawk was starting to accept me. But there was a deeper, darker thrill. It was that I had been forgotten.

-- Helen (Chapter 7 paragraph 20)

Importance: Helen once again emphasizes how much she wants to get away from the world. She enjoys feeling like she's been forgotten because that means she won't have to interact with anyone. This section also serves to highlight all of the progress that she's made with training Mabel.

The hawk was everything I wanted to be: solitary, self-possessed, free from grief, and numb to the hurts of human life.

-- Helen (Chapter 9 paragraph 5)

Importance: One of the themes of the book is about Helen discovering you have to be true to yourself. At this point in the book though, Helen is trying to live like a hawk because she admires the way that they don't have to feel grief and can be completely numb towards any human feelings.

I look at the blank façade and think of the letter I'd sent that morning to a German university telling them I couldn't accept the job they'd offered me that winter. I told them I was sorry, told them that my father had died and I needed to be here. But I was not sorry, and they were not the reasons for my refusal. I can't go to Berlin in December, I'd thought, appalled. I have a hawk to fly. Ambitions, life-plans: these were for other people. I could no more imagine the future than a hawk could. I didn't need a career. I



didn't want one.

-- Helen (Chapter 13 paragraph 11)

Importance: Helen is so deep in her depression that she doesn't care about the fact that she's going to lose her job and soon be homeless. All she wants is to live like Mabel does.

I knew I should talk to him, but couldn't remember how. I tried a few words. They sounded wrong. I stuck a watery smile on my face and turned my head towards the window, desperately trying to remember how to have a conversation.

-- Helen (Chapter 14 paragraph 46)

Importance: Helen has retreated so far into the wild that she's having trouble interacting with humans. One of the themes of the book is that everyone needs support in their life. At this point Helen is rejecting any support and ignoring human contact, which only makes her suffering worse.

I had found my addiction on that day out with Mabel. It was as ruinous, in a way, as if I'd taken a needle and shot myself with heroin. I had taken flight to a place from which I didn't want to ever return.

-- Helen (Chapter 18 paragraph 26)

Importance: Helen is finally starting to see that living through Mabel is dangerous. She knows that she has to take care of her life, but it was just so much easier for her to lose herself in Mabel's world because everything seemed so much simpler.

Now I knew this for what it was: a beguiling but dangerous lie. I was furious with myself and my own unconscious certainty that this was the cure I needed. Hands are for other human hands to hold. They should not be reserved exclusively as perches for hawks. And the wild is not a panacea for the human soul; too much in the air can corrode it to nothing.

-- Helen (Chapter 23 paragraph 15)

Importance: Helen has come to recognize that not only was she running away from her problems, but she was hurting herself by trying to cut off all contact with humanity. She knows now that she needs human support if she's ever going to recover.