

How Should a Person Be? Study Guide

How Should a Person Be? by Sheila Heti

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Plot Summary

“How Should A Person Be?” is a semi-autobiographical novel by Sheila Heti. The novel features Sheila herself as the main character in search of her identity: how a person should be. This question preoccupies Sheila throughout the course of the novel. It is something she discusses at great length with her friends, including her best friend, Margaux. Sheila admires Margaux because Margaux appears to be confident in who she is and what she does as a painter. Sheila struggles with a play she has been commissioned to write, because she is unsure of her own talents and whether or not she has anything to say. Sheila longs to be admired and praised, but she isn't sure how she should be to earn that praise.

Sheila reflects on her recent life, including how she was married for three years but subsequently divorced. She considers it a mistake. Sheila also considers giving up on her play since it isn't coming along the way she wants it to. Sheila also goes on to wish she was more like Margaux. Despite this, Sheila's friend Misha reminds her that in life, mistakes happen and must be made in order for people to grow. Sheila's therapist, Ann, explains that Sheila is a “puer,” a person who makes new plans the moment things get difficult. Ann explains that Puers are dangerous because they are always switching from one thing to the next. Instead of building to something meaningful based on successes and failures, puers avoid failures, mistakes, and meaning of any kind to avoid difficulty. The solution is to not give up but rather endure things like failure and mistakes.

Sheila is not entirely reassured by this. She begins dating a man named Israel, but the relationship is purely sexual, and Israel is very dominant over Sheila. She goes on to purchase a tape recorder during which time she begins recording everything and everyone around her. Sheila brings the tape recorder along with her on a trip to Miami for an art show for Margaux. Upon returning home, Sheila transcribes everything from the tape and creates a written account of the entire trip. Upon reading this story, Margaux is horrified because she believes she comes off as a narcissist and thinks her work is now meaningless. Margaux wants to end their friendship. Sheila is horrified. She decides to journey to New York where she hopes to find herself and do important things. Sheila comes to realize that she has always approached life like a student, seeking to be taught something.

Sheila goes to Atlantic City. There, she meets a man named Ron who reassures her that God has her back. He explains that everything happens for a reason, that God will not abandon those who seek Him out, and that God catches people when bad things come up. Sheila is comforted by this, prays, and then knows in her heart she is meant to go home. Back home, Sheila mends her relationship with Margaux. Margaux reveals she has never been totally sure of herself, either, but has come to accept who she is. She is getting back in touch with the real emotions and meanings of painting, rather than being concerned about wealth and success. Sheila comes to realize she herself has been an elitist, and that there is nothing making her better than everyone else. Anywhere she gets in life she will have to have earned it. Having accepted that she is

just as a person should be—no better than everybody else—Sheila can now be who she is: herself. She takes stock of the important things in her life, like Margaux, and jettisons the things she finds unimportant, such as Israel.



Prologue and Act One

Summary

Prologue – Sheila wonders how a person should be, especially when being who they truly are. Sheila notes that responsibility looks good on her friend, Misha, while irresponsibility looks good on her best friend, Margaux. Sheila wonders what her own look should be and knows she can't miss the whole point of life. Sheila does not know what the point of life is, either. She would like a simple life, is Jewish, and is not thrilled about the age in which she lives because of stupid people. She admires how Margaux can throw her hands up to any problem and say, "Who cares?"

Act One

Act One, Chapter 1, Sholem Paints – Sheila, Margaux, Misha, and Sholem and his boyfriend Jon have brunch. None of them want ugly people in their lives. Margaux and Sholem decide to have an Ugly Painting Competition. Sholem agonizes and paints a hideous landscape in an eyeball, while Margaux has not yet begun painting at all. Misha and Sheila talk about Sholem's need to do the right thing. Years before, Sheila worries about being married because she figured she would only end up divorced like her parents. Sheila reflects on how Misha told her that big mistakes needed to be made, and that three years after getting married, Sheila got divorced.

Act One, Chapter 2, At the Point Where Conviction Meets the Rough Texture of Life – In the time before getting married, getting married is the primary thought on Sheila's mind. Before getting married, Sheila has only lived with one man, a high school boyfriend. The boyfriend became jealous when Sheila developed a crush on a photographer, and went on to write a private play for Sheila, in which Sheila featured as a character who could never be satisfied. The play stays with Sheila through life. She worries she can never be satisfied. At a party with her husband years later, a beautiful married woman flirted with him which caused Sheila serious jealousy. The woman was Margaux.

Act One, Chapter 3, Sheila and Margaux – In the past, Margaux wished to be friends with Sheila, while Sheila did not. Sheila realized she had never had a real female friend before and had come to admire Margaux for her courage, heart, and intelligence. Sheila reflects on how she and Margaux began to correspond by e-mail, realized they had a love of the arts in common, and became friends. She also reflects on how Margaux taught her not to care what other people say.

Act One, Chapter 4, Sheila Can't Finish Her Play – Divorced in the present, Sheila is having trouble finishing her play. It is for a feminist theater company commission. The play must be about women, but does not have to be feminist. Sheila has no idea where to go with the play, and thinks about how much surer she was about things when she was younger. Sheila goes out for a walk with Margaux, who has not finished her ugly



painting. She doesn't tell Margaux about her uncertainty, or about having to decide who to be.

Analysis

“How Should A Person Be?” is a semi-autobiographical novel by Sheila Heti, which features Sheila herself as the main character in search of her identity and an answer to the question of how a person should be. This question preoccupies Sheila throughout the course of the novel. From the title of the novel and the very first page, the theme of identity emerges as central to the plot. Sheila will obsess over identity throughout the entire novel primarily as a means to understanding who she herself is as a person. Sheila's decision to commit to determining how a person should be also means that she is launching herself on a journey. Sheila's quest for identity becomes a journey, and journey itself becomes a central theme to the novel.

Sheila's pursuit of an answer to the question of how a person should be brings Sheila into contact with her friends. Chief among them is Sheila's best friend, Margaux. Through Margaux, Misha, Sholem, and Jon, the theme of friendship becomes important to the novel as well. Sheila indirectly asks their advice and their thoughts on the question, and they respond just as any real friend should. Sheila sees through her friends a sense of confidence in who they are and what they do. She reflects on the advice given to her by Misha, about the importance of making big mistakes in life. Making big mistakes is also a part of the long journey to one's identity. Sheila does not come right out and say she is questioning her own identity at the moment, though this comes later on in the novel. Sheila's observation of the confidence of her friends gives her hope, but also proves troubling to her because she herself is uncertain about her identity.

To a large degree, the arts factor into the identities of Sheila and her friends. The arts prove to be a strong theme that will be found throughout the novel, beginning with this first section. Sheila is a writer. Margaux, Misha, and Sholem are painters. Sholem also does some acting. Art is central to the group of friends and to who they are as people. Margaux, for example, is fast becoming a successful painter. It is what she seeks to do more than anything else in life. She is confident in her artistic abilities, and is confident in her ability to make beautiful things.

Sheila's identity crisis is also having a troubling effect on her writing. Having been commissioned to write a play about women for a theater troupe, Sheila struggles with the play because she is unsure of herself, and by extension, her capabilities. Sheila is a young woman who is constantly seeking to please and be admired, and herein is part of the problem as she will later learn. She is willing to conform to what others want or expect—such as wanting to produce a play that will be remembered, earn her praise, and change lives—but has not seriously considered what her own identifying foundations might be. Part of Sheila's uncertainty comes from the push and pull of those around her, and wanting to be praised by them.



Discussion Question 1

What are the various reasons that Sheila is having an identity crisis? Which of these reasons are more pronounced than the others? Why?

Discussion Question 2

Why is Sheila having such a difficult time writing her play? How does she plan to handle this situation?

Discussion Question 3

Why does Sheila admire her friends so much when it comes to their identity? How does this affect Sheila in her own search for her identity?

Vocabulary

ethical, qualms, reluctant, delineate, bewildered, eavesdrop, materialistic, nonchalance, decorum, articulately



Act Two

Summary

Act Two, Chapter 1, Sheila Goes to the Salon – Sheila works in a beauty salon to pay the bills after her divorce. She comes to love the work and admire the chief stylist and owner, Uri. As Uri teaches Sheila, he explains that balance hides flaws. Uri is very consistent, and Sheila aspires to also be consistent.

Act Two, Chapter 2, Fate Arrives, Despite the Machinations of Fate – Sheila buys a tape recorder for \$129.32 with her credit card.

Act Two, Chapter 3, Sheila Wants to Quit – Sheila uses the tape recorder all the time. She records a conversation with Margaux. Sheila wants Margaux's thoughts on her play. Margaux worries about being recorded but agrees. Sheila reveals her play begins with two families, the Oddis and the Sings, accidentally meeting in Paris. 12 year-old Daniel Sing goes missing. 12 year-old Jenny Oddis desperately wants to find him. So does Mrs. Oddi, who comes to realize she is deeply dissatisfied with her own life because her family undervalues her. Mrs. Oddi is a lifelong flutist, but worries she is not good enough to play during dinner at the hotel at which they are staying. Sheila believes her play is nonsense. No one at the theater has agreed on any of the drafts of the play. Margaux thinks Sheila will pull off something remarkable and contends that this is what the play should be about.

Act Two, Chapter 4 – Sheila Wants to Live – Sheila worries the play she is writing is not serving her life in any way. Margaux thinks the experience of writing the play might be the important part about it. Sheila worries about producing bad work. Margaux reflects on working hard for something that might not end up serving Sheila. Sheila says she doesn't know about the play. She considers giving up.

Act Two, Chapter 5, Israel – Sheila attends a party celebrating the release of three volumes of poetry where she meets up with an acquaintance, a baker named Israel. Sheila is very attracted to him. They leave the party together. While Sheila contends it doesn't matter who someone is with, Israel contends it matters very much. They head back to Israel's place and have sex.

Act Two, Chapter 6, The Story of the Puer – Sheila has a nightmare about a plane crash just beyond a massive garbage dump. Sheila bails out just in time, then goes to get on another plane. She calls Ann, her Jungian analyst, about the dream. The plane ride, Ann considers, is like Sheila's experience with the play. But going back for another plane is reflective of choices, Ann contends. Such a person is a "puer," a person who makes new plans the moment things get difficult. Puers are dangerous because they are always switching. Instead of building to something meaningful based on successes and failures, puers avoid failures, mistakes, and meaning to avoid difficulty. The solution is to not give up, and to endure things like failure and mistakes.



Act Two, Chapter 7, Prayer of the Puer – Sheila says a prayer to God for help in her current crisis, and to help her accomplish in her play what she thinks needs to be accomplished –to make a difference and change the lives of people.

Act Two, Chapter 8, Margaux Paints – Margaux grows plants on her balcony, including a tree she and Sheila will plant in the yard of a friend whose father has died recently. Sheila and Margaux talk about raising their future babies together. Margaux reveals she has been painting swimming pools into all of her work, including one which features Sheila. Margaux explains the painting was going to be called “Genius” but is now going to be called “House for a Head.” Sheila doesn’t like this because she wants to be a genius, but doesn’t say anything aloud.

Act Two, Chapter 9, They Wander in Miami – Sheila decides to accompany Margaux to a show in Miami in the winter. The city will be full of art fairs and exhibits, including the famous Miami Basel. Margaux’s will be featured at Scope. On the way down, Margaux reassures Sheila that Sheila has a good brain even though Sheila thinks she is blank. Margaux believes there are great people, but their work needs context to point out this greatness, such as an article or more than one piece of work. Margaux’s work is recognized and praised by attendees in Miami.

Act Two, Chapter 10, Two Dresses – Back from Miami, Sheila receives an e-mail from Margaux. Margaux is unhappy the two of them have purchased the same yellow dress in Miami, leading Margaux to throw hers out in order to keep a distinct identity. Sheila is hurt by this and does not respond.

Interlude for Fucking – Sheila and Israel go out on a date. They spend hours together talking and walking by the water, and hours having sex in the ways Israel wants. Sheila can’t get enough of Israel, but she notices there is no love in his eyes. Israel explains he has learned not to need any woman.

Analysis

Sheila’s first step in her journey toward identity has come through her acknowledgement that she is indeed in need of discovering how a person should be. Her second step in this journey toward identity is in buying a tape recorder. This tape recorder will prove to be monumentally important for Sheila and her friendship with Margaux in future chapters. The reader should note the unusualness of buying a tape recorder given that Sheila lives in the digital age when everything can be done with a smartphone, and when even digital voice recorders have been made obsolete by smartphones.

There is some symbolic significance in Sheila’s choosing a tape recorder. Whereas a smartphone can be many different things, a tape recorder can only truly be a tape recorder. A tape recorder’s identity is given, while Sheila’s identity is in question. The tape recorder will help Sheila get to the root of her problem. She strives to be consistent the way the tape recorder (and Uri) are consistent in who they are. The reader should note, however, Margaux’s reluctance at being recorded. The reason for this will be



revealed later on in the novel. The reader should also bear in mind how Margaux threw out the same kind of yellow dress both she and Sheila purchased so as to maintain her own identity. Here is the first indicator that Margaux may not be as sure of herself as Sheila thinks, for a simple dress has ruptured their friendship and caused Margaux an identity crisis.

At the same time that Sheila struggles to be praised and lauded, she gets into a purely sexual relationship with Israel. She seeks to please Israel, being what he wants her to be, rather than seeking out her own identity. This ultimately throws Sheila further into crisis. This identity crisis is also reflected in Sheila's play, about a woman who does not feel valued by her family, and whose own identity is in flux. While this woman has been a lifelong flutist, familial expectations drown that part of her life out. As a result, the woman thinks she is not very good at being a flutist even though she loves to play. Frustrated, she does not. Frustrated, Sheila considers giving up on the play.

Sheila's reluctance to tackle things head-on, or to get her hands dirty, reflects her nature as a puer as laid out by Ann. As soon as the going gets tough, Sheila gives up. The play has become difficult in conjunction with Sheila's identity crisis and her self-doubts about whether she is any good at writing or if her play will be celebrated and will change the world. Sheila believes she is intended for a destiny, but doesn't realize that getting anywhere in life is going to take hard work. It will mean failure and trouble along the way in this journey, but the reward will be great if she succeeds, and there is a chance she may not succeed. Sheila prays to God about this. She recognizes that she will have to do hard work, but still considers herself to somehow be above everyone else while at the same time wanting their praise and admiration. It is a tough act to fill, and only lends to Sheila's identity confusion.

Discussion Question 1

In what ways is Sheila a puer? What is her reaction upon discovering that she is a puer? Does she attempt to change her life in any way? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 2

Do you believe Sheila's relationship with Israel is beneficial to her, especially in terms of her identity? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 3

In what ways is Sheila reflected in the play she is writing? Why do you believe Sheila is having such a hard time completing the play?

Vocabulary

machinations, inexplicable, cavernous, everlasting, inevitably, aloof, blithely, baronial, renunciation



Act Three, Chapter 1, Two Spiders – Act Three, Chapter 13, Destiny Rears Its Ugly Head

Summary

Act Three, Chapter 1, Two Spiders – A few weeks pass. Sheila and Margaux repair their friendship. Margaux recalls how, when she and Sheila were roommates, they found a daddy-longlegs spider in their bathroom. Rather than kill it, they let it live and left the bathroom shut all the time. Sheila even became affectionate toward it. But one night, she the door was left open. In the morning, the spider was beside Sheila, who smashed it without thinking twice about it because the boundary—the bathroom door—had been removed. Margaux explains she needs boundaries too, and the yellow dress was such a boundary.

Act Three, Chapter 2, They Wander the City on Drugs – Sheila reflects on the past, on a night where hard partying doing cocaine lead to a routine of the same thing over and over. Their friends begin avoiding them because of this. Ultimately, Sheila stops doing drugs and partying because she finds it juvenile and unoriginal. She worries about being unoriginal and nothing special.

Act Three, Chapter 3, Anthony and Uri – Sheila works extra shifts at the salon to keep herself distracted. Sholem is not thrilled about the Ugly Painting Competition. Sholem thinks it is Margaux's way of working through a painting crisis. She longs to be a communicator through painting. If there is still some beauty or value in her ugly painting, it will restore her faith in painting. Sheila compares Uri and one of his new hires, Anthony. Uri considers himself a craftsman of excellence, while Anthony considers himself an artist. Sheila's mother sends an e-mail to Sheila asking for help cleaning out the apartment.

Act Three, Chapter 4, Sheila Begins Again – Sheila and Misha go out to dinner. At home, Sheila has received a package in the mail from Margaux containing Sheila's tape recorder, accidentally left behind at Sheila's. The recorder contains a message for Sheila from Margaux, with Margaux reassuring Sheila that she should not feel insecure and should instead get to work on the play. Sheila transcribes the message, then feels inspired to write about the trip to Miami. It is a good feeling.

Act Three, Chapter 5, The White Men Go to Africa – Sheila invites former playwright collaborators Andrew and Ben to dinner with her and Margaux. Ben and Andrew explain they went to visit Africa as a way to get away from narcissism because it is fashionable to do so, but they realized it defeated its own purpose. However, they explain, the trip helped them to see more of the world and find ways to help people there. They explain they were shocked at how much women depend on men in Africa when the men only



ever drink and hang out. Ben and Andrew explain they are working on a play to draw attention to Africa based on their experiences. Later, Sheila asks Margaux to read her new writing. Margaux doesn't want to at first, but agrees.

Act Three, Chapter 6, The Art Show – At a Paul Petro-curated art show, Sheila sees a self-portrait of Margaux as Buddha. Sheila knows Buddha turned his back on the suffering of the world to make himself feel better with good feelings of benevolence and purity. Margaux has never painted herself exposing her worst fears about what it means to be a painter. She realizes it is Margaux's ugly painting.

Act Three, Chapter 7, Margaux Quilts – Sheila goes to see Margaux about the ugly painting. Margaux recalls a friend who became a Buddhist and painted the inside of a temple in which only rich people could see the work. Margaux feels this has become her, that what she has been doing has become meaningless. Sheila then notices that Margaux's studio is empty of all art supplies.

Act Three, Chapter 8, Sheila Quakes – Sheila blames herself for what has happened to Margaux, since she has pushed a boundary by writing down Margaux's words. She believes she has mixed up the beauty in Margaux's life with the ugliness in her own through the writing, and that it has traumatized Margaux. She believes that Margaux has identified herself as a narcissist, when in the story Sheila was identifying herself as the narcissist. Sheila decides to stay away from Margaux so as not to hurt her anymore. She feels horrible about what has happened.

Act Three, Chapter 9, What is Cheating? – Sheila considers how human beings are often gestures of one another. Instead of being an original painting, people appear to be like an original painting.

Act Three, Chapter 10, What is Destiny? – Sheila considers her next step. She decides she will not let her life crumble around her because she has no soul. She compares herself to Moses, who killed a man in his youth only to be challenged about it later on when he tries to stop two men from fighting each other. They rhetorically ask Moses if he will kill them too if they don't stop fighting. Moses then flees town.

Act Three, Chapter 11, The Bus Station – Sheila looks through the book "Important Artists" while waiting on a bus. She uses it to cross-reference which city most great artists live in. It is New York. New York becomes Sheila's destination.

Act Three, Chapter 12, Sheila Wanders in New York – Sheila's friend, Jen, who lives in New York, agrees to let Sheila stay with her a few nights in the Lower East Side until Sheila can find her own apartment. Sheila is anxious to go out and conquer the city and do important things with important people.

Act Three, Chapter 13, Destiny Rears Its Ugly Head – As Sheila wanders around New York, all she can think about is having sex with Israel. At a party with Jen, Sheila befriends a girl named Anjali. They talk about dating and how French men are afraid of women and being fathers. Sheila receives an e-mail from Israel in which he demands



he write her a letter about sex while wearing a dress with no panties in a restaurant and exposing herself to an old man.

Analysis

Sheila and Margaux repair their friendship during the yellow dress incident. Sheila deeply values Margaux as a friend, so she wants very badly to make sure everything is okay between them even though Margaux deeply hurt Sheila by her reaction. This in turn belies Sheila's incessant need for approval and praise. This leads to Sheila giving Margaux her transcriptions of their conversations, and the written account of their Miami journey. This proves to be a tremendous mistake, as Margaux seemingly severs the friendship between them.

Sheila blames herself for what has happened. Her thought process is as varied as her search for identity. At first, Sheila believes that Margaux merely misread the play, seeing herself as being the narcissist rather than Sheila. Sheila then goes on to consider that she may be talentless, and has hurt Margaux by mixing Margaux's beauty with the ugliness of her writing. Sheila knows she has crossed a boundary with Margaux somehow, as the reader will reflect on Margaux's analogy of the spider in the bathroom. Breaking boundaries is a dangerous things.

Sheila comes to realize that Margaux is having an identity crisis of sorts, and this largely explains her reaction to Sheila's writing. Margaux believes she has become too detached from her work and the world around her, which in turn threatens her identity as a painter. Likewise, she believes she has indeed become a narcissist focused on wealth and success rather than the art itself. But rather than reorienting her artwork, Margaux cleans house by not wanting to see Sheila and by ditching all of her art supplies. Throwing away her art supplies is essentially the throwing away of her identity. She is now in the same boat as Sheila. Sholem underscores this point by explaining how concerned Margaux is with the Ugly Painting Competition, hoping something of beauty will still manage to shine through. Margaux hopes something of beauty will still shine through her present ugly crisis.

Sheila also considers something incredibly important as it relates to the art world, which in turn relates to identity. Few people are truly original, and everyone else copies them. Sheila realizes that she herself did not write something original in her Miami document, but merely copied an original. It makes Sheila realize how much of life is similar, and makes her question her own originality and talent. Sheila begins to doubt that she even has real talent if all she can do is copy down something that happened in real life. When confronted with the truth, Sheila flees town the way that Moses did. This forms a physical manifestation of Sheila's journey to self-discovery and identity. Just as Margaux has thrown out the old, so too now does Sheila. By seeking out a new place, Sheila hopes she will discover how a person should be, yet she is already mimicking the actions of great artists and is not even original in going to New York.



Discussion Question 1

Why does Sheila believe Margaux has reacted so poorly to the story? Do you believe any of Sheila's thoughts on the matter are correct? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 2

Do you believe Margaux is having an identity crisis? Why or why not? Provide evidence from the novel to support your claim.

Discussion Question 3

Why does Sheila blame herself for the seeming demise of her friendship with Margaux? Do you believe Sheila is correct in assigning herself blame? Why or why not?

Vocabulary

haughty, narcissism, colossal, inundated, aversion, decadent, improbable, leery



Act Three, Chapter 14, Sheila Wanders in the Copy Shop – Act Three, Chapter 27, What is Freedom?

Summary

Act Three, Chapter 14, Sheila Wanders in the Copy Shop – Sheila goes out for paper, a pen, and stamps. In a copy shop, she meets a Jew named Solomon. They have a doctrinal discussion about how Jews are always Jews no matter what, even if they convert. Solomon thinks the Jews would never have ended up in their current situation, cast around the world, if they had written a constitution and adhered to it. As Sheila leaves, she realizes Solomon is just another man who wants to teach her something.

Act Three, Chapter 15, What is Empathy? – Sheila rushes to a restaurant to carry out the task assigned to her by Israel. The letter writing comes easily and annoys Sheila because it has been so hard to write her play. She realizes the old man she has been flashing has been replaced by a newly-arrived boy who laughs at her, and she rushes out. She questions why she has even come to New York and realizes she is just another man trying to teach herself a lesson.

Act Three, Chapter 16, What is Love? – Sheila panics and leaves Jen's for Atlantic City. She wants to find a way to fix herself, to stop herself from always seeking out a lesson. At a casino on the boardwalk after losing money on games of chance, Sheila meets a man named Ron. She asks him if he thinks everyone goes to Heaven, or some people go to Hell. Ron asks why a loving God who created someone would put that same someone in Hell for a mistake. He says that everything that happens is for a reason. God always has the best interest of people at heart. Just as something bad comes up, God takes care of people. The next morning, Sheila knows in her heart she is meant to go home.

Act Three, Chapter 17, Exodus – Sheila considers that she might be a follower rather than a leader. She compares the journey back home from New York like Moses in the desert. At a bus stop in Gravenhurst, Sheila gets a grilled cheese sandwich, but it isn't what she is expecting. Still, it is something, and she accepts it as reality.

Act Three, Chapter 18, What is Betrayal? – At home, Sheila finds a letter from Margaux. Margaux is furious that Sheila has left, believing that Sheila has found how a person should be through her and has now left. Margaux believes Sheila has been using her, and says she can no longer be Sheila's friend. Sheila feels horrible.

Act Three, Chapter 19, In Front of the Bikini Store – Sheila goes to see Margaux, saying she has figured out nothing. Margaux then says she thinks their friendship has been meaningless. Sheila meets up with Sholem. Sholem has been worried that his acting is



better than his painting. Sholem believes this after praying to God, wanting never to be the kind of person who can talk about painting, but can't make a beautiful painting.

Act Three, Chapter 20, Sheila's Fear – Sheila quits her job at Uri's. She knows she will suffer from missing it, but will also suffer in other ways if she stays. She realizes all choices in life involve suffering of some kind. Uri offers to do Sheila's hair on her last day, putting in highlights. Instead, he bleaches her hair completely, making her hair appear gray. Sheila doesn't even recognize herself in the mirror.

Act Three, Chapter 21, How Great it is to Be an Adult – As a child, Sheila admires adults and wants to be one of them. Now that she is an adult, she feels as though she is in orbit and not really an adult.

Act Three, Chapter 22, A Stranger Is A Friend of Another Stranger on Account of Their Strangeness on Earth – Sheila goes to her mom's house and cleans out all of her old things. Some she throws out, some she takes home with her. Among these things is an old letter of comfort from Sheila's ex-mother-in-law right after the divorce. It speaks about the importance of saving things.

Act Three, Chapter 23, Back in Front of the Bikini Store – Sheila longs to save her friendship with Margaux. She knows Margaux hates quitting anything, and knows Margaux has too much empathy. Margaux demands Sheila finish her play so she'll never have to think about how a person should be again. Margaux concedes that it doesn't have to be a play.

Act Three, Chapter 24, The Castle – Sheila is relieved to learn Margaux is painting again and has a show coming up in New York. Margaux explains she has taken stock of her life, including things variable and invariable, and has decided Sheila is an invariable. She cannot be done without. Margaux has decided to make a movie about her life, but never with her whole life shown. She compares it to having a castle at the center of the film in which sand is thrown against it, lighting up only parts of it, but never the whole thing.

Act Three, Chapter 25, Israel Beckons – Israel sends an e-mail to Sheila in which he tells her to buy a porn magazine, get horny, roll it up, put a condom on it, use it like a dildo, and to photograph it all for him.

Act Three, Chapter 26, Destiny is the Smashing of the Idols – Instead of writing about how a person should be, Sheila goes to a bar to meet Israel. They then go back home, but she refuses to do as he says sexually. This kills the buzz between them. When he goes in the morning, he leaves a quarter on her windowsill. Sheila is thrilled. It is the first time she has truly done something for herself not wanting to be admired.

Act Three, Chapter 27, What is Freedom? – Sheila realizes that there is nothing special about her in an elitist sense, and she deserves to be in the world like everyone else.



Analysis

As the novel continues, Sheila at long last comes to determine how a person should be, and who she herself is as a person. Sheila comes to realize she herself has been an elitist, and that there is nothing making her better than everyone else. Anywhere she gets in life she will have to have earned it. Having accepted that she is just as a person should be—no better than everybody else—Sheila can now be who she is, and that is herself. She is no longer in search of lessons. She is not the unrecognizable face in the mirror as is seen at Uri's. Sheila's journey has been completed. She knows God has her back, and here the theme of faith becomes foundational to Sheila as Sheila knows she is meant to return home. She has a destiny, a purpose, and a sense of identity.

This is crucial because all along, Sheila has been comparing herself to everyone else and seeking praise from everyone else, when in reality she has forgotten how to be herself. Her first form of rebellion against this uncertainty is standing up to Israel and refusing to make herself what he wants, and instead being who she is. Symbolically, this can be seen through her ordering a grilled cheese sandwich. The sandwich isn't exactly what she was expecting. Still, it is something, and she accepts it as reality. Sheila herself isn't what she was expecting, but she accepts it as reality and knows she can always improve herself like a grilled cheese sandwich.

Sheila brings this resolve back to Margaux. Margaux, though adjusting to her own identity crisis, is still identifiable for two things: she never gives up on anything, and she is very empathetic. Sheila prevails upon these two admirable traits to repair her friendship with Margaux. Margaux confesses her own identity crisis, saying that she has come back around to painting once more. She reveals she has reevaluated not only her painting, but the important things in her life. She considers one such important thing to be Sheila.

Identities can change, as Sheila learns through Margaux and through Sholem. Sholem worries that his acting is better than his painting. His identity as a painter has been challenged by competing talent, and talent that is arguably better than painting. Here, the arts continue to be thematically important as they form core identifying features of Sheila, Margaux, and Sholem. Their continued friendship with one another helps them to learn and grow, not in the effort to please as was the case with Sheila in the past, but in the effort to find themselves.

Discussion Question 1

What is the truth behind Margaux's reaction to Sheila's transcriptions? Does Margaux's example help or hinder Sheila in her own quest for her identity? Why?



Discussion Question 2

What is Sheila's first major step in finding her identity and adhering to it? How does this ultimately affect Sheila in terms of her confidence and outlook on her life?

Discussion Question 3

What does Sheila learn from Sholem and Margaux with respect to identity? How does this help Sheila?

Vocabulary

dignified, empathy, rummaged, imperious, betrayal, unsullied, irrevocable



Act Four – Act 5

Summary

Act 4

Act Four, Chapter 1, Sheila Throws Her Shit – Sheila gets to work writing, illuminating parts of her own castle.

Act Four, Intermission – At the movies, Sheila runs into her ex-husband. She wonders aloud why people live their lives the way they do, for example imagining themselves to be tragic figures with tragic flaws responsible for pain. Her ex thinks it may be because otherwise, people would feel too discouraged to survive once they realized they were insignificant. Sheila thinks it may be because the truth is too hard to accept.

Act Five

Act Five, Chapter 1, The Ugly Painting Competition – In an e-mail to Sheila, Margaux wonders if Sheila believes she is not a person because she thinks she has no effect on other people. Margaux explains she herself was worried about being recorded because she felt like it took away some of her freedom, but agreed to do it combat that fear. Sheila, Margaux, Jon, Misha, and Sholem get together for the judging of the Ugly Art Competition. Margaux's experiences in the competition, she explains, have changed the way she now paints, all for the better. Sholem contends that while Margaux's painting using black and yellow to make hideous shapes is ugly, her skill is not.

Act Five, Chapter 2, The Sack – Sheila and Margaux celebrate Margaux's birthday. Margaux admits that the entire time Sheila has been recording her, she has really been looking at her and seeing her for who she is. Sheila realizes how invaluable Margaux is. She reflects on how things people love should have fences around them. Those fences come to make the circle of the heart. Sheila realizes Margaux is as much a treasurable person as Sheila herself is.

Act Five, Scene 3, The Gravedigger – Sheila relates the story of a ditch-digger complimenting the perfectionist ways of a gravedigger, but becoming frustrated eventually at the perfection. The gravedigger explains that not everyone can be a gravedigger and a grave must be deep and perfect because a human body goes into it.

Act Five, The Gods – Sholem is uneasy because no winner has been declared in the Ugly Painting Competition. The winner will be declared by a game of squash. Everyone gathers together to watch, until they realize that nobody knows the rules of the game, and Sholem and Margaux are simply slamming the ball back and forth.



Analysis

As the novel comes to a close, Sheila considers her newfound identity in conjunction with a past mistake: being married. It is interesting to note that Sheila's first big mistake in life—marriage and divorce—something that she was afraid of initially, has helped her to grow. She is able to consider the idea of identity with her ex-husband, and how people are either afraid to face the truth, or deny the truth in order to avoid discouragement in order to live. As such, everyone invents wild ideas and dreams about themselves that mask the truth of identity, as has clearly been the case with Sheila. Sheila refuses now to give up on her writing, and returns to it.

At the same time, Sheila relates the story of the gravedigger and the ditch-digger. Not everyone can be a gravedigger, the gravedigger contends, because grave digging requires specific work that not everyone is willing to do. The gravedigger in turn could not be a ditch-digger due to his perfectionist nature. Sheila may be a writer, but may not necessarily be a playwright. Sholem may be an artist, but his art may ultimately be in the theater rather than the studio. It is possible that Sholem may indeed be both an artist and an actor. It would not be impossible to be both. This in turn is noted by the squash game, in which the action of lobbing the ball back and forth without a clear winner is indicative of a person's identity comprising multiple things.

The one form of identity that everyone can agree on at the end of the novel is that they are friends. The Ugly Art Competition is an extension of that friendship, as is the subsequent squash match. By this point, Sheila has repaired her friendship with Margaux. When it comes to life, the future is uncertain even if Sheila has found how a person should be. Here, the squash game—with no clear knowledge of the rules and with an uncertain outcome—becomes symbolic of life in general. There are no precise rules, and the outcome is uncertain. However, so long as Sheila knows who she is, she will be alright.

Discussion Question 1

What is important about Sheila's conversation with her ex-husband when it comes to identity and mistakes? What does Sheila take away from this conversation?

Discussion Question 2

Why does Sheila reflect on the story of the gravedigger and the ditch-digger at such length? What does this have to say about Sheila, Margaux, and Sholem?

Discussion Question 3

How did Sheila challenge Margaux to examine her own sense of self-identity? What has been the result especially as it relates to friendship between the two?

Vocabulary

proportions, diffuse, insignificant, mechanism, counterintuitive, obliterated



Characters

Sheila

Sheila Heti is the writer, main character, and narrator of the novel, "How Should a Person Be?" Sheila's life between her early twenties and early thirties is examined as she endeavors to find out who she truly is as a person. Sheila is always looking for approval, considers herself destined for greatness, and above everyone else despite the fact she can't even complete a play commission. She quits things at the first sign of difficulty, a fact pointed out to her by her therapist. Sheila struggles with her crisis of identity, which is reflected in her play, in her submissive relationship with Israel, in her divorce, and in her friendship with Margaux which is thrown into question as a result.

Sheila begins to suspect that she is capable only of mimicking originality, and that she will never truly find herself. Sheila undertakes a trip to New York to find herself, but it is in Atlantic City that she learns that God will never abandon her even if she is lost. She then feels in her heart she is meant to return home. There, she repairs her friendship with Margaux, breaks up with Israel, and comes to realize that she is no more special than anyone on the planet, that she can only ever be herself rather than what people want her to be, and she must earn what she wants.

Margaux

Margaux Williamson is Sheila's best friend. A phenomenal painter, Margaux is on the fast track to success and wealth. Secretly, she nurses concern about her identity and independence, thrown into crisis by Sheila's own search for identity. Margaux comes to recognize that she herself is narcissistic, and has lost touch with the true meaning of painting. She symbolically cleans out her life by cleaning out her art studio, takes stock of important things such as Sheila, and then recommits to painting once more, moving into the world of film as well.

Israel

Israel is an acquaintance of Sheila's that she begins a torrid, sexual relationship with. The relationship involves Sheila's submission to anything Israel wants her to do. It is in keeping with Sheila's nature to please others to earn praise and elevate herself. When Sheila finally attempts to take some control in the relationship, Israel ends it, cruelly leaving a quarter on her windowsill to write her off as cheap and nothing special.

Misha

Misha is a long-time friend of Sheila and Margaux. Misha is an excellent painter who experiences his own crisis of identity in the novel. It is Misha who encourages Sheila to



not worry about making the big mistakes in life and to learn from those mistakes when they are made.

Sholem

Sholem is a gay artist in a relationship with Jon. Sholem is a painter who comes to question his identity as a painter in the novel when he learns he may be better at talking about painting rather than painting. Simultaneously, he discovers he has a knack for acting, and considers branching out into theater. He demonstrates that an identity can comprise multiple talents, and that what someone thinks their identity may be may not always be the same down the road.

Ann

Ann is Sheila's therapist. Ann is a Jungian in her psychological training, giving great insight to Sheila's life through Sheila's dreams. Ann denotes that Sheila is a puer, someone who quits too easily and can't make up their minds. Sheila learns much from Ann as a result, seeking to finish what she starts and stick through thick and thin in pursuit of a goal.

Ron

Ron is a gentleman Sheila meets at a casino in Atlantic City, New Jersey. Ron is a devout believer, entering Sheila's life at just the right moment to remind her that God does the same. He reassures her that God has her back, and will not let her fall too far. Because of this, Sheila prays and discovers in her heart the conviction that it is time to go home.

Jen

Jen is Sheila's friend who lives in New York. Jen allows Sheila to come and stay with her for several days while Sheila gets oriented in the city and finds an apartment. Jen is a good and caring friend who brings Sheila along on all her social outings.

Uri

Uri is the owner of a hair salon at which Sheila is employed. Uri considers himself a craftsman who strives for excellence in his service. When Sheila misses several shifts while being in New York, and later quits, Uri gives her the gift of doing her hair on her last day. While it is unsure if it is intentional or not, Sheila's hair ends up bleached to the point that it appears gray. As a result, Sheila does not recognize herself in the mirror, a sign that she has changed from who she was.

Moses

Moses is a Biblical and historical figure who factors in to the Old Testament and the Bible, acting as God's agent on Earth to deliver the Jewish people from slavery in Egypt to the Promised Land. Moses becomes a hero and role model for Sheila due to his long journey to find himself. Like Moses, Sheila realizes that God has not abandoned her.



Symbols and Symbolism

Sheila's play

Sheila's play begins with two families, the Oddis and the Sings, accidentally meeting in Paris. 12 year-old Daniel Sing goes missing. 12 year-old Jenny Oddis desperately wants to find him. So does Mrs. Oddi, who comes to realize she is deeply dissatisfied with her own life because her family undervalues her. Mrs. Oddi is a lifelong flutist, but worries she is not good enough to play during dinner at the hotel at which they are staying. Her identity is in flux: While this woman has been a lifelong flutist, familial expectations drown that part of her life out. As a result, Mrs. Oddi thinks she is not very good at being a flutist even though she loves to play. Frustrated, she does not. Frustrated with herself, Sheila considers giving up on the play. The play is reflective of Sheila's own identity frustrations in life.

Sheila's ex-boyfriend's play

Sheila's ex-boyfriend's play is written by her boyfriend when he learns she has a crush on a photographer. The play is about a girl who is never satisfied with anything she has. Sheila is deeply wounded by the play not because it is intended to be insulting, but revealing. Sheila comes to realize later on in the novel that she is exactly as she is described in the play—never truly satisfied with anything.

Tape recorder

Sheila purchases a tape recorder that costs \$129.32. It will appear strange that Sheila engages in buying a tape recorder given that she lives in the digital age when everything can be done with a smartphone, and when even digital voice recorders have been made obsolete by smartphones. There is some symbolic significance in Sheila's choosing a tape recorder. Whereas a smartphone can be many different things, a tape recorder can only truly be a tape recorder. A tape recorder's identity is given, while Sheila's identity is in question. The tape recorder will help Sheila get to the root of her problem. She strives to be consistent the way the tape recorder is consistent in what it is.

Plane crash nightmare

Sheila has a nightmare about a plane crash just beyond a massive garbage dump. Sheila bails out just in time, then goes to get on another plane. Sheila consults with Ann, her therapist, about the dream. The plane ride, Ann considers, is like Sheila's experience with the play. The takeoff is exciting but she has come to think the writing or the ride is garbage. But going back for another plane is reflective of choices, Ann



contends. Sheila is making too many choices and not sticking with any of them. Such a person is a puer.

Puer

A puer is a person who makes new plans the moment things get difficult. Puers are dangerous because they are always switching. Instead of building to something meaningful based on successes and failures, puers avoid failures, mistakes, and meaning to avoid difficulty. The solution is to not give up, and to endure things like failure and mistakes. Sheila is labeled a puer by her therapist, Ann.

Yellow dress

The exact same yellow dress is purchased by Sheila and Margaux while in Miami. This distresses Margaux greatly, who feels a lack of identity because she owns the same kind of dress as Sheila. She decides to throw out her dress to remain distinct from Sheila. This signals the beginning of Margaux's own identity crisis, and leads to a rupture in the friendship between Sheila and Margaux.

Transcript

A transcript and written version of Sheila's conversations with Margaux and the trip to Miami are compiled by Sheila. These are given to Margaux for Margaux's approval. Margaux comes away from the writings believing she is narcissistic, whereas Sheila had intended herself to be the narcissistic character. This greatly distresses Margaux, throwing her into a deeper identity crisis and nearly destroying their friendship. Sheila comes to believe that she is not a good writer because she did not make up her own story, but merely copied down the one that happened in Miami.

Margaux's Buddha self-portrait

A self-portrait of Margaux as Buddha is entered into a gallery opening and viewed by Sheila. The portrait reflects Buddha turning his back on the suffering of the world to focus on good feelings, while also referencing Margaux's friend who lost touch with the purpose of art to paint in a Buddhist temple for the rich. Margaux's painting is meant to be ugly and self-critical and reveals her crisis of identity in which she has lost focus of the true purpose of art.

"Important Artists"

"Important Artists" is a book Sheila consults upon going to New York. Seeking originality and a place to make her name, Sheila looks up the city where most famous artists have lived—New York—and decides to go there as well. Sheila only later realizes that the trip



to New York does nothing for her except to help her realize she is merely copying originality once more.

Grilled Cheese Sandwich

Sheila orders a grilled cheese sandwich from a bus stop in Gravenhurst on the way back home from New York. It is symbolic of Sheila herself. The sandwich isn't exactly what she was expecting. Still, it is something, and she accepts it as reality. Sheila herself isn't what she was expecting, but she accepts it as reality and knows she can always improve herself like a grilled cheese sandwich.



Settings

Uri's Salon

Uri's is a hair cutting salon which Sheila takes a job at while trying to make it as a writer. Sheila works at the studio nearly every day. There, she learns about Uri's identity as a hairdresser. He considers himself to be a craftsman, and focuses on excellence. Sheila misses numerous shifts on her New York trip, leading her to finally quit work. During her last day, Uri offers to highlight her hair. Intentionally or unintentionally, Uri's job ends up bleaching Sheila's entire head, making her look like an old woman, and making Sheila unrecognizable to herself.

Sheila's apartment

Sheila's apartment is where Sheila lives and works on her writing. It is the scene of numerous gatherings with friends, and is where Sheila carries on her sexual relationship with Israel. As the novel progresses, and Sheila's friendship with Margaux further breaks apart, Sheila spends more and more time at her apartment until she heads to New York. Sheila's apartment is also where Sheila finally stands up for herself, coming into her own against Israel and refusing to submit to his sexual demands.

New York

New York is the city to which Sheila decides to move after the falling out with Margaux. Sheila moves to New York believing she will find herself there, and will make something of herself there. While in New York, she stays with her friend, Jen, who shows Sheila the town. However, Sheila shockingly learns that she was not there to find herself, but to learn something and please the city for praise and admiration. Sheila ultimately flees New York for Atlantic City.

Atlantic City

Atlantic City, New Jersey, is where Sheila flees after New York. Sheila is reeling from her experience in New York and has never felt more lost, alone, or depressed. In Atlantic City, Sheila meets a man named Ron who counsels her on God's love and how God always has a plan for everyone. Sheila prays on this that night, and in the morning realizes in her heart that she has been called on to go home.

Squash court

The squash court is where the Ugly Painting Competition is going to be settled. There, Sheila and her friends watch as Margaux and Sholem play squash to determine the

winner of the art contest. Only belatedly do they realize that none of them know the rules of, or how to play squash. This takes on an important symbolic meaning of life in general. There are no precise rules in life, and the outcome is uncertain. However, so long as Sheila knows who she is, she will be alright.



Themes and Motifs

Identity

Identity is an important theme in the novel “How Should a Person Be?” by Sheila Heti. A person’s identity, which includes their purpose and how they come to view and understand themselves, is essential to the plot of the novel. Indeed, the idea of how a person should be is reflected in the very title of the novel itself. This designates the novel-long search of main character Sheila to be who she is meant to be. During the novel, other characters, including Margaux and Sholem, also come to question their identity.

For Sheila to become who she is meant to be, she must first come to accept who she is versus who she thinks she is. This process takes much of the book, and is an ever-evolving process. When the novel begins, Sheila is something of an elitist. She believes she is not like common people, and believes she has a destiny which sets her apart from the common people for greatness, but to which they will look for inspiration. As she comes to learn, this is not the case. Her desire for approval and praise is reflective of her uncertainty and her narcissism. Her inability to achieve anything worthy of praise is reflective of her puer nature, in which she runs or quits at the first sign of trouble. Likewise, she comes to understand that there is much less original about herself than she would have previously believed. This is all reflected in the play she wants to give up writing, in which a woman denies her true nature in order to fulfill the expectations of others.

Sheila ultimately comes to discover that a person should simply be himself or herself, and that nothing sets them apart from one another in an elitist way. Everyone is different, but everyone is also the same. Sheila takes control of her own life by challenging and ending her relationship with Israel, and by resolving to finish her writing. Sheila comes to understand that, while she might not necessarily be saying or doing anything truly original, that doesn’t make what she does worthless. Likewise, it is better to earn something than to simply arrive at it. What other people think of Sheila doesn’t matter so much as what Sheila thinks of her, herself.

Much of Sheila’s concern about her own identity comes from the seeming sureness of Margaux and Sholem about their identities. Margaux is very confident as a painter, gaining prestige and wealth quickly, while Sholem himself is very confident about his painting capabilities. However, as the novel progresses, Margaux endures her own identity crisis in which she begins to experiment with quilting and with film. She realizes that she has lost focus on the true purpose of art as she has grown in fame. Sholem, likewise, worries that he may be more hype than substance, and moves into theater as well as continuing to paint just in case he is better at one than the other.

The reader should recall the story of the gravedigger and the ditch-digger related in the novel. Not everyone can be a gravedigger, the gravedigger explains, because grave



digging requires specific work that not everyone is willing to do. The gravedigger in turn could not be a ditch-digger due to his perfectionist nature. Sheila may be a writer, but may not necessarily be a playwright. Sholem may be an artist, but his art may ultimately be in the theater rather than the art studio. It is possible, alternatively, that Sholem may indeed be both an artist and an actor. It would not be impossible to be both. This can also be seen reflected by the squash game, in which the action of lobbing the ball back and forth without a clear winner is indicative of a person's identity comprising multiple things, and alternating between them.

Journey

Journey is an important theme in the novel "How Should a Person Be?" by Sheila Heti. In literature, journeys are often not only an actual, physical trip from one place to another, but have a deeper meaning or purpose to them, such as learning, growing in character, or even coming to some important truth or realization. In the novel, the journey Sheila takes is not merely a physical trip to New York, but an emotional journey of self-understanding and self-discovery in conjunction with the theme of identity.

When the novel begins, Sheila is questioning her identity. This signals the beginning of a journey that will obsess Sheila throughout the novel. She begins by asking friends how a person should be, noting that each of her friends has distinctive identities that suit them. Sheila herself wants such an identity. By questioning others, and by examining their sureness, Sheila's own self-doubts increase. Her emotional and intellectual journey leads her to a place of uncertainty and understanding.

Examining herself through the lens of others—specifically her ex-boyfriend, her therapist, and Israel—Sheila realizes that she is not what she thinks she is. She learns a greater truth from the journey, that she is not set apart from other people and marked for greatness, she is too eager to please at the expense of herself, she is a puer, and she is seldom satisfied with anything. This gives her a launching pad from which to strike out on her own. Here, the physical journey to New York comes into play, but the destination is not the answer as Sheila thinks it is. The destination only increases her self-doubt, and drives her on to New Jersey's Atlantic City.

It is in Atlantic City that Sheila truly begins to find herself through Ron's counseling and the intervention of God. Learning that God will not abandon her, Sheila strikes out for home. Through her experiences on the road, Sheila comes to understand and accept that there is nothing elite about her, that she is the same as everyone else, that anything that sets her apart must be earned, and she cannot give up so easily. Most importantly, she learns that a person should be just as they are: themselves.

Friendship

Friendship is an important theme in the novel "How Should a Person Be?" by Sheila Heti. Friendship is central not only to the plot of the novel, but to Sheila's life as well.



Sheila's friends have a strong influence and impact on her life, especially Margaux, Misha, and Sholem. This is especially important as it comes to the theme of Identity.

When the novel begins, it is clear that Sheila, Margaux, Misha, Sholem, and Sholem's boyfriend Jon form a group of friends who enjoy one another's company, and do everything they can together from dinner to attending gallery openings. Sheila and Margaux in particular are best friends, having been best friends since college. Both young women even live as roommates at one point, always supporting one another in their endeavors. It helps for each of them to have a constant source of moral and emotional support.

When Sheila begins her crisis of self-confidence and identity, she looks to her friends to see how they are as people. She recognizes responsibility in Misha, and rebelliousness in Margaux. She recognizes that all of her friends take their identities very seriously, especially when it comes to the arts. This in turn causes Sheila greater uncertainty in the face of such certainty. Her friends offer their thoughts and advice on identity, but Sheila doesn't acknowledge or accept it right away. For example, Misha explains that big mistakes have to be made in life, or a person can't grow from them. Sheila is determined to avoid any sort of struggle at all.

When Sheila's friendship with Margaux is first ruptured by the yellow dress incident, and later nearly destroyed by the transcription of the Miami trip, Sheila is devastated. She is so torn up about what has happened—especially because it plunges Margaux into an identity crisis—that she travels to New York to start all over again. New York does not work out for Sheila, so upon return home, she reconnects with Margaux. The women make up, and resume their friendship. Their closeness helps Sheila to better understand herself in light of how Margaux has made changes in her own life to reorient herself toward the true purpose of art.

The Arts

The Arts is an important theme in the novel "How Should a Person Be?" by Sheila Heti. The arts include everything from painting and writing to theater and film. The arts form a core part not only of the plot of the novel, but the identity of the main characters as well.

Each of the characters live their lives in pursuit of the arts. Their passion for the arts is an identifying feature of each person. Sheila is a writer. Sholem is a painter. Mishca is a painter. Margaux is a painter. Much of what these characters do to earn money revolves around art. Margaux sells her work in galleries. Sheila works a day job in order to support her writing, while at the same time accepting commissions to write plays for a theater group.

Each of the characters reflect their own lives in their work as well. Sheila's uncertainty and worry that she isn't any good is seen in Mrs. Oddi, one of the main characters of her play. Margaux's worry that she is missing the true purpose of art in pursuit of wealth and fame lead to the self-portrait of Buddha. Later, Margaux's concern about being



totally exposed in her artwork leads her to construct an imaginary castle in her new film in which sand thrown at the castle will only illuminate what is hit. Margaux's life will be illuminated only in pieces, never as a whole.

Sheila's ability to do her work as a writer is hampered by her crisis of identity. She cannot move past the first draft of her play, and believes that everything she has written is somehow nonsense. She wants to write something that will both please people and change their lives. This is a difficult thing to do, but she believes it is her destiny as a writer of plays. Yet she comes to the realization at the end of the novel that she might be a writer rather than a playwright, the way that Margaux ventures into film and Sholem ventures into theater.

Faith

Faith is an important theme in the novel "How Should a Person Be?" by Sheila Heti. In the novel, the kind of faith dealt with primarily is religious faith, specifically belief in God and Judaism. Sheila herself is Jewish and believes in God, but she considers Him primarily from a distance. She is not devout, yet very much believes in God and the Old Testament.

Sheila knows she is a member of God's Chosen People. She knows that the Jews have a special relationship and purpose through God, but Sheila comes to feel as if she is uncertain of her identity and who she is as a person beyond being Jewish. Much of Sheila's uncertainty comes from her nature as a puer, and her seeming inability to have accomplished her first real commission as a playwright.

When Sheila realizes that she herself did not write something original in her Miami document, but merely copied an original story, she compares herself to Moses. Sheila begins to doubt that she even has real talent if all she can do is copy down something that happened in real life. When confronted with the truth, Sheila flees town the way that Moses did. Sheila relates how Moses tried to stop two men from fighting, who then rhetorically asked if Moses would kill them if they didn't stop fighting. Moses, years before in his youth, had killed another man. Confronted with this, Moses flees.

Sheila is at her lowest after New York City when she comes to Atlantic City. She is sad, lonely, and lost. She believes she will never figure out her way. It is then that Ron enters the picture, counseling Sheila on God. He explains that God will never let her fall, and will take care of her when things seem bleakest. God is someone to be relied upon. Sheila takes this to heart, and prays to God about her current situation. In the morning, she has the conviction in her heart that she should return home.

Styles

Point of View

Sheila Heti tells her novel “How Should a Person Be?” in the first-person, stream-of-consciousness narrative mode from her own point of view. This is done for at least two reasons. First, because Sheila is both writer and character, and because the novel is semiautobiographical, it is only natural that she should tell the novel from her point of view. Sheila personally relates events that occur to the fictionalized version of herself and incorporates elements of her own real life into the novel as well. Secondly, the novel takes on the stream-of-consciousness aspect due to the fact that Sheila is both writer and character, and because the novel is told in first-person. The reader is given a glimpse into the mind of Sheila, where thoughts, feelings, and events jumble together, and where Sheila’s thoughts and feelings move from one situation or consideration to the next.

Language and Meaning

Sheila Heti tells her novel “How Should a Person Be?” in language that is simple and straightforward. This is done for at least two reasons. The first is that the novel is written in language contemporary to the 2010s (the novel was published in 2012). The story takes place in that time, so the language is reflective of the language then used. Secondly, Sheila is a young woman in the novel who begins in her early twenties and finishes the novel in her early thirties. The simple and straightforward language is reflective of that age, and the informal and to-the-point way of speaking of young people in the 2010s. This makes the novel more authentic and believable, both in terms of setting and characterization.

Structure

Sheila Heti divides her novel “How Should a Person Be?” into four major parts preceded by a prologue and an epilogue entitled “The Gods.” Each part is called an “Act” in reference to Sheila’s nature as a playwright, and each Act is further subdivided into chapters. While some chapters are only a paragraph or two long, some are in excess of 15 pages. Each Act deals with a major part of Sheila’s life. For example, Act One is primarily an introduction to Sheila and her uncertainty. Each chapter is divided up into vignettes, written prose, and transcribed recordings of Sheila’s conversations with others. The uncertain and vacillating nature of the structure of the book—moving back and forth between these methods of storytelling—is reflective of Sheila’s vacillations, uncertainty, and stream-of-consciousness where one thing leads to the next.



Quotes

How should a person be?

-- Sheila (Prologue paragraph 1)

Importance: From the very start of the novel, and in reference to the title, Sheila asks how a person should be. This includes everything, she explains, from how someone dresses to how they treat their lovers. No two people ever truly have the same answer, and no two people are ever truly the same, including Sheila herself. This sets the stage for the novel as Sheila seeks to find who she might best be.

You can admire anyone for being themselves... Responsibility looks so good on Misha, and irresponsibility looks so good on Margaux. How could I know which would look best on me?

-- Sheila (Prologue paragraph 2)

Importance: Sheila further explains here how she is looking to determine how she should be. Responsibility looks good on Misha, she explains, while irresponsibility looks good on Margaux. Sheila wonders what look would be best for her. This helps lay the foundation work for the theme of identity that comes to perforate the novel.

The only thing I ever understood is that everyone should make the big mistakes.

-- Misha (Act One, Chapter 1 paragraph 41)

Importance: Sheila, good friends with Misha, wonders about life and trying to avoid making mistakes. She worries about getting married because her own parents are divorced. She worries that marriage might be a mistake. Misha explains that risks must be taken, that everyone should make the big mistakes. This helps people to grow and make better sense of their lives. Sheila decides to go through with marriage, only to be divorced three years later.

I tried to forget his play, but I could not, and the more I pressed it away, the more it seared itself into my heart.

-- Sheila (Act One, Chapter 2 paragraph 16)

Importance: While dating her high school boyfriend, Sheila develops a crush on a photographer. This hurts the boyfriend deeply, who writes a play about Sheila in which Sheila is featured as a character that can never be satisfied. Sheila ends up deeply troubled by the play, attempts to forget it, but cannot. In her search for who she should truly be, Sheila worries that she may never be satisfied.

Who cares what people say? What people say has no effect on your heart.

-- Sheila (Act One, Chapter 3 paragraph 22)

Importance: Sheila's friendship with Margaux teaches Sheila a lot of things. Among these things is the understanding to not listen to what other people have to say about



someone. This should have no bearing on who someone truly is. Sheila, who is attempting to figure out how a person (herself in particular) should be, dwells on this understanding in her search. It is important because who Sheila is, is a question only she herself can answer.

There is a solution for people of this type... The answer for them is to build on what they have begun and not abandon their plans as soon as things start getting difficult.
-- Ann (Act Two, Chapter 6 paragraph 23)

Importance: Sheila meets with her therapist, Ann, about her plane nightmare and her difficulty in getting her play worked out. Ann explains that Sheila is a puer, someone who gives up at the first sign of struggle. Ann explains that this can be avoided provided Sheila is willing to endure struggle, and to appreciate what she has. It is advice that Sheila takes to heart.

I am not thinking of the one who said that in order to gain life, you have to lose it. If I lose it, I will be like the earth spinning off its axis into infinity, and who knows, without being something I can gaze at and admire, if I will ever find my way back.
-- Sheila (Act Three, Chapter 2 paragraph 53)

Importance: Sheila considers failing and losing everything in her life in the context of Milton. Whereas Milton believed what was lost could be regained, Sheila doubts if her life can ever be regained should she fail. Her self-confidence is supremely low at this moment in her consideration of the fact that she believes she is nothing special to begin with.

I had come too close and hurt her—killed whatever in Margaux made art, whatever allowed her to tell herself that it was all right to be a painter in the face of all her doubts.
-- Sheila (Act Three, Chapter 8 paragraph 2)

Importance: Sheila blames herself for what has happened to Margaux—the creation of the ugly Buddha painting—since Sheila has pushed a boundary by writing down Margaux's words. She believes she has mixed up the beauty in Margaux's life with the ugliness in her own through this writing, and that it has ruined and deeply hurt Margaux. Margaux must have mistaken the narcissist intended to be Sheila in the writing for herself. Sheila feels horrible.

I know better than to let my life crumble around me just because somewhere inside me I am without a soul.
-- Sheila (Act Three, Chapter 10 paragraph 3)

Importance: Sheila is heartbroken after the fallout with Margaux over the story. She believes that she has no soul for what has happened, and for her inability to write something original or fresh. Ironically, instead of staying to confront the situation, Sheila feels as if she must back away from Margaux quickly, and leave town just like Moses did.



I had no idea how it had come to this, or what I needed to do to fix what was inside me.
-- Sheila (Act Three, Chapter 16 paragraph 1)

Importance: Sheila feels lost and broken after her experiences in New York. She comes to realize she always seems to be needing to learn something, and is just as lost as ever about who she believes herself to be. She decides to flee for Atlantic City from New York, where a brief encounter will change her life for the better.

If you believe in God, he's already taken care of you.
-- Ron (Act Three, Chapter 16 paragraph 11)

Importance: Sheila, feeling lost and uncertain, and having lost money on bets and games of chance at the Atlantic City casinos, meets Ron. It seems all of Sheila's chances have run out, but Ron explains that God will always have her back, that just when it seems worst, God comes through. God knows who everyone is, and has things planned for them, even if these things aren't realized until years later. This comforts Sheila to a large extent. The next morning, Sheila knows in her heart she is meant to go home.

Aren't I human? Who am I to hold myself aloof from the terrible fates of the world? My life need be no less ugly than the rest.
-- Sheila (Act Three, Chapter 27 paragraph 3)

Importance: At long last, Sheila has her answer to how a person should be. She has long imagined that she was destined for great things, to be unique in an elitist way, separate from everyone else. Sheila comes to realize that a person should simply be themselves, that they should live their lives, that no one is better than anyone else in the elitist sense, and that everyone is human.