The Human Comedy Study Guide

The Human Comedy by William Saroyan

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Plot Summary

This novel, set in a small American town during World War II, is a coming of age story anchored by the experiences of Homer Macauley, a teenage telegraph messenger who discovers truths about human experience in general and about himself in particular while delivering telegrams, many of which report on the deaths of loved ones. Episodic and poetic, with an emphasis on creating a portrait rather than developing a plot, The Human Comedy explores themes relating to the existential, essential loneliness of human existence and the different ways human beings strive and struggle to keep that loneliness at bay.

The novel begins with a simple experience of joy: on a warm, bright afternoon, Ulysses Macauley, younger brother of the novel's protagonist, enjoys experiences of animals in his back yard, a friendly man on a train, and his mother's company. Soon afterwards, however, his older brother Homer, on one of his earliest deliveries as a telegraph boy, passes on news of her son's death to a suddenly (and perhaps understandably) traumatized middle-aged woman.

On their journeys throughout their hometown and through the next couple of days, Homer and Ulysses both encounter vividly portrayed characters who, one way or another, educate them about the ways of the world. At the telegraph office there's the selflessly compassionate Mr. Spangler and the aged, weary, fragile Mr. Grogan. At home, there's the gently grieving (and profoundly wise) Mrs. Macauley and oldest sister Bess who, with her friend Mary Arena, takes pity on a visiting trio of soldiers and joins them on a date at the movies.

Then there are the two very different shop owners, the worldly and infinitely generous Mr. Ara and the less worldly, more selfish Mr. Covington, and a wide selection of characters at Homer's school. In terms of teachers, there's Mr. Byfield (the manipulative athletic coach), Miss Hicks (the spinster teacher with a surprising perspective on detention) and Mr. Ek (the principle, more interested in doing the right thing than in being popular with either his faculty or the parents). In terms of classmates, Homer has encounters with the well-off Hubert, the beautiful but aloof Helen, and the amusing Joe. There are also telling glimpses of a couple of outsiders (word traveler Rosalie Sims-Pibity and the mysterious, chilling Mr. Mechano), several townspeople (including the taciturn Big Chris, the flamboyant Diana Steed and the amused Mr. Henderson, who lets Auggie and his friends steal apricots from his tree. Most importantly, there are the absent members of the Macauley family - elder son Marcus (engaged to Mary Arena and about to go fight in the war) and the dead Mr. Macauley, who visits his wife as a ghost, offering compassion and warnings of a future in which Marcus is killed.

Several times in the book, narration and characters both comment on an essential loneliness at the core of human existence in general and of every individual life. There are also several portrayals of how various characters act on their belief that a powerful way to combat that loneliness is to act selflessly and with compassion. There are also

several suggestions that faith, specifically the Christian faith, is also a powerful weapon in that particular fight.

Through all of this, Homer Macauley essentially becomes a man - not physically, as he's some time away from going through puberty, but emotionally and spiritually, with a lived awareness of what it takes or costs to live and die in this world. The biggest test comes when he is given a telegram to deliver to his own home - a telegram announcing Marcus's death. The day the telegram comes, however, there is another arrival - Marcus's best friend in the army, a man who grew up without family and, as a result of hearing Marcus's stories, came to think of the Macauleys as his family. The novel concludes with the grieving Macauleys smiling through their tears and welcoming the young soldier, Tobey George, into their home.

Part 1, Chapters 1 through 7

Part 1, Chapters 1 through 7 Summary

In "Ulysses", young Ulysses Macauley enjoys nature (a gopher and a bird) in his back yard, and then runs to look at a passing train. Of all the people he waves at, including the conductor and some passengers, only a black man waves back and shouts his joy at going home. Wandering back to his home, Ulysses' mind returns again and again to the black man's joy, thoughts which persist even when he encounters an old man who seems to be deliberately ignoring him. When Ulysses gets home, he helps his mother collect eggs from the chicken hatchery in the back.

In "Homer", Ulysses's older brother Homer, wearing "a telegraph messenger's coat which was far too big and a cap which was not quite big enough", rides his bicycle through the town. As he goes, he too makes note of the beauty of nature, "ornamenting" it with movements of his bicycle and with singing. As he goes, he remembers his brother Marcus, and as he remembers, waves at a convoy of soldiers passing by, all of whom wave back. "Why not," narration comments. "What did they know about anything?"

In "The Telegraph Office", Homer arrives at the telegraph office where he has recently started working nights and after school delivering telegrams. He waits as Mr. Spangler, the office manager, pays for a poor young man to send a telegram to his mother asking for money so he can come home. After the young man leaves, conversation between Homer and Mr. Spangler, the office manager, reveals that Homer lied about his age to get the job (saying he was sixteen when he is, in fact, only fourteen). After Spangler sends Homer out for food, he and Mr. Grogan, the near-retirement telegraph operator, discuss the poverty of Homer and his family and their belief that Homer is going to be a good employee. When Homer returns, the surprised Spangler congratulates him on his speed, and goes. Grogan gives Homer the rules of how to behave if he (Homer) sees Grogan drunk, either on the job or on the street. As a new telegram comes in, Grogan asks Homer to sing a hymn, and as he does, Grogan transcribes a message telling Mrs. Rosa Sandoval that her son has been killed in the war. After Homer goes out to deliver the message, Grogan sings Homer's hymn himself.

In "All the World will be Jealous of Me", Mrs. Macauley and her daughter Bess, the mother and sister of Homer and Ulysses, play Marcus's favorite song on the piano - "All the World will be Jealous of Me". They are joined by neighbor Mary Arena, who is in love with Marcus. Ulysses comes to listen, and then asks his mother a series of probing, precocious questions about Marcus (who, Mrs. Macauley says, is fighting in the war), about his missing father (who, Mrs. Macauley explains, is dead), and about gophers (who, Mrs. Macauley says, are just as much a part of the wonder of life as people are). Ulysses falls asleep, and as Bess and Mary are putting him to bed, Mrs. Macauley has a vision of her dead husband Matthew.

In "You Go Your Way, I'll Go Mine", Homer arrives at the home of Mrs. Sandoval with his telegram. When Mrs. Sandoval opens the door, she delays hearing the contents of the telegram as long as possible, but eventually collapses into tears when she realizes that her son is dead. Homer feels a strong sense of empathy with her, and imagines her as a young mother rocking her baby's cradle. He rides back to the telegraph office in tears.

In "A Song for Mr. Grogan", when Homer arrives at the telegraph office, he discovers that Mr. Grogan is drunk. Homer follows his instructions and wakes him up in time to receive what Grogan describes as an unimportant telegram about the accumulation of money. As he transcribes the telegram, Grogan grumbles about how the powers-that-be want to replace him and other telegraph operators with machines, commenting that he's famous for being one of the best telegraph operators in the business. He asks Homer to sing, and Homer does.

In "If a Message Comes", Mrs. Macaulay is waiting when Homer comes home and listens when he tells her of his experiences with Mrs. Sandoval and Mr. Grogan. He explains that he feels lonely in a way that he's never felt before, even when his father died. Mrs. Macauley gently tells him what she believes to be the reason for that loneliness, tells him that "the world is full of frightened little children," and that "being frightened, they frighten each other." She urges him to think of people with compassion and to always give selflessly, and then tells him she will always be waiting up for him in case he needs to talk but will not expect him to.

Part 1, Chapters 1 through 7 Analysis

This first section of the novel introduces its major elements - character, storyline, and themes. Among the most important characters are Homer (the novel's protagonist, or central character) and Ulysses (Homer's younger brother, and the novel's main supporting character). A significant point to note about these characters is their names. "Homer" is the name given to the author of the Classical Greek epic poems "The Iliad" and "The Odyssey", both of which deal with the Trojan War and its aftermath, and both of which feature a character named Ulysses who, at the end of the war, took ten years to make his way home to the land of Ithaca. In the context of the novel, therefore, the name "Homer" is evocative of the archetypal idea of the storyteller,which Homer is, communicating "stories" in the telegrams he delivers, stories which may be far from epic in length but which, as in the case of Mrs. Sandoval, epic in terms of their emotional content and effect. Meanwhile, the name "Ulysses" is evocative of the idea of the traveler, which Ulysses is, traveling through town having a series of adventures and also "traveling" through his childhood. A related point about names is the name of the town - Ithaca, which is also the name of the homeland sought by Ulysses in "The Odyssey". This, in turn, is an important element of the novel's thematic contemplation of the idea and associations of "home". Other themes introduced in this section are the idea of the loneliness at the core of individual human existence, and the various ways in which human beings fight to keep that loneliness at bay, ways that include the selflessness referenced by Mrs. Macauley and the other ways in which the characters reach for human contact.

In terms of storyline, it's important to note that there isn't really a plot anchoring the narrative. In other words, rather than character-driven events following one after the other from beginning to end, the storyline consists of a series of incidents that are cumulative in effect rather than linear, a portrayal of experiences that result in transformation rather than a narrative of striving to achieve a particular goal (a basic definition of plot). This style of storytelling, which is essentially the creation of a portrait, is typical of this sort of coming of age narrative, in which a child or childlike character comes to a more mature understanding of what it means to be a human being.

That said, there are several incidents of foreshadowing in this section. Ulysses's gathering of eggs with his mother is the first of several uses of eggs as symbols of hope. Spangler's treatment of the young man with the telegram foreshadows the young man's reappearance in chapter twenty-two, while both the telegram to Mrs. Sandoval and the ghostly appearance of Mr. Macauley foreshadow the death of Marcus.

Finally, it's interesting to note how the novel opens with an experience of joy, in life and in nature and in human connection ... a joy that appears (albeit in muted, subtle, subdued forms) several times throughout the book, a joy that returns at the end of the book in spite of the tragic news that arrives in the last chapter. Ultimately, the joy here and throughout the book is perhaps the most powerful response to the loneliness the novel suggests is at the core of existence.

Chapters 8 through 12

Chapters 8 through 12 Summary

In "Be Present at our Table, Lord", the next morning, Homer and Ulysses wake up together, and Ulysses watches as Homer does bodybuilding exercises learned from a magazine he ordered from the city. Ulysses tells Homer about the black man on the train, and Homer explains to him that everyone has a different home to come back to, adding that he (Homer) will always be glad to come home when he goes on his world travels. They also discuss Homer's determination to do well in a track meet that day - specifically, in a hurdling event. At breakfast, Bess challenges Homer to explain to her exactly what the prayer he uses for grace, "Be Present at our Table, Lord", means. He does, and Mrs. Macauley adds that "it's faith that makes anything wonderful - not the thing itself." Mary Arena arrives and, after commenting that she's eager to get out of college and get a job, goes out with Bess. After Homer leaves, Ulysses comes down, singing the song sung by the black man on the train and asking his mother whether the man will be on the train again. She thinks and answers yes.

In "Rabbits around Here Somewhere", Homer practices his hurdling on a ramshackle fence, knocking it to pieces. A elderly man watches and comments that the weeds on the other side of the fence are milkweeds which, he adds, are good food for rabbits, which leads him into reminiscences of how dozens of his domestic rabbits escaped his care years before, and have probably given birth to hundreds of descendents. As Homer runs to school, the man comments to himself that the rabbits must be "Wild by this time - not the way they used to be."

In "Ancient History", the track coach, Byfield, seems to be manipulating the result of the hurdle race that afternoon so that high class Hubert Ackley the Third will win. In Ancient History class, the elderly Miss Hicks tells her students that she aims to help them understand the present by learning about the past. In the class are Hubert, Homer, class clown Joe and the beautiful but snobbish Helen, whom Homer loves. Helen reads from a history text describing the kingdom and accomplishments of the Ancient Assyrians. A conflict between Hubert and Homer results in them both being kept in from competing in the hurdles race. As Helen finishes reading about the Assyrians, specifically about the scientific advances they brought to the world and about their large noses, Homer falls half-asleep and has a half-dream.

In "A Speech on the Human Nose", Homer leads off discussion of what Helen read by spontaneously talking at length and with clever humor about noses. In spite of being impressed, Miss Hicks insists that he and Hubert stay after class instead of participating in the track meet.

In "The Two-Twenty Low Hurdle Race", Coach Byfield asks Principal Ek to release Hubert from Miss Hicks's punishment. When Ek refuses, Byfield goes to Miss Hicks and implies that Ek has given permission. After Hubert goes out with Byfield, Miss Hicks

reveals that she knows Byfield was lying and that she wasn't keeping Hubert and Homer in to punish them, but to talk with them and help them get to know each other better. She then releases Homer to go run in the race which he does, keeping pace with Hubert in spite of Byfield's attempts to interfere. Hubert helps Homer get past Byfield's interference, and the race is a close finish. Byfield attempts to bar Homer from participating in any other athletic activities, but Miss Hicks countermands him.

When Joe Terranova comes to Homer's defense, Byfield calls Joe a racist name and the infuriated Joe tackles him. Ek runs up and separates them. Miss Hicks explains what happened and tells Ek that Byfield owes Joe an apology. When Joe says it's not necessary, Miss Hicks explains, saying, "he is not apologizing to you or to your people. He is apologizing to our own country. You must give him the privilege of once again trying to be an American." Ek supports her, and Byfield grudgingly apologizes. Miss Hicks and Ek then dismiss the gathered crowd of curious students, with Ek assuring them "the war isn't going to last forever". Narration describes how, as Homer leaves, he's limping as the result of Byfield's attempted interference.

Chapters 8 through 12 Analysis

On first glance, it may seem that many of the events in this section have little relationship to the novel's themes. Upon further consideration, however, it's possible to see that Byfield's favoritism and bullying, Miss Hicks' intentions (for both her class in general, and in particular for Homer and Hubert), and even the actions of Joe Terranova are, in their own and very different ways, attempts to keep the existential loneliness, which is at the core of the novel's thematic perspectives, at bay. Specifically, Byfield wants to make himself seem important and powerful and therefore worthy of respect from others and therefore less alone. Miss Hicks wants to make her class, and both Hubert and Homer, aware that they are not alone either in human history or in the present. Joe Terranova acts out of a desire to resist ethnic racism which, like all forms of discrimination, is fundamentally intended to increase and perpetuate isolation.

Another, perhaps more perceivable, attempt at fighting off loneliness can be found in chapter eight's contemplation of faith, a subject explored with clear but subtle plainness throughout the novel. Specifically, in the discussion of grace here and in the singing of hymns at several points throughout the book, there is the sense that in the novel's thematic perspective faith, specifically traditional Christian faith, is and/or can be an important weapon in the battle against existential human solitude.

Chapters 13 through 16

Chapters 13 through 16 Summary

In "The Trap, My God, the Trap!", the curious Ulysses accidentally gets caught in a new trap being demonstrated for the hermit-ish Big Chris by shop owner Mr. Covington. Young newsboy Auggie by fetches Homer, who angrily insists that his brother be gotten out right away. Over the objections of the business-conscious Mr. Covington, Big Chris uses brute strength to set Ulysses free. Meanwhile, Homer asks Ulysses if he wants anything, and Ulysses answers that he wants his father or Marcus. Big Chris eventually breaks the trap and releases Ulysses. Mr. Covington insists that someone pay for the trap. Big Chris gives him twenty dollars and goes. Homer, meanwhile, hurries over to the telegraph office - the encounter at the store has made him late for work. Mr. Spangler forgives him and sets him off delivering telegrams right away. Mr. Spangler also agrees to keep an eye on Ulysses.

In "Diana", Homer goes off to deliver telegrams, and Spangler explains to Auggie why he (Auggie) is too young to be a messenger. Auggie insists, revealing his last name is Gottlieb and Spangler, after hearing the name, agreeing to make Auggie a messenger. A young woman named Diana, driven by a chauffeur, rushes in, reminds Spangler that he's coming to dinner to meet her parents, and rushes out again, but not before she buys a paper from Auggie. Spangler goes out for a drink, leaving Ulysses in the care of Mr. Grogan.

In "The Girl on the Corner", as Spangler is going, he hears the sound of a call for service from a local business. He races out to answer the call before his competitor, and is running across town when he sees a beautiful, lonely-looking young woman at a bus stop. He slows down just enough to kiss her cheek and compliment her, but still makes it to the business before the competitor. He compliments the receptionist, who hands him the telegraphs to be sent, and leaves the office feeling good about everything. He passes the bus stop, thinking to himself about how he'll never see the girl again, and then stops for a drink at his favorite bar, where he talks with the bartender, a former boxer named Corbett. As Spangler leaves, three soldiers at the bar start playing the piano and singing. "Their singing," narration comments, "wasn't particularly good, but the feeling with which they sang was not bad at all."

In "I'll Take you Home Again", when Spangler gets back to the office, Homer congratulates him on getting the telegrams and then says he's going to take Ulysses home, but to come straight back to work. Homer then puts Ulysses across the handlebars of his bike and rides home, teaching Ulysses to sing along the way. This makes Ulysses remember his encounter with the black man. At home, Homer hands Ulysses over to Bess and Mary Arena, then goes back to work.

Chapters 13 through 16 Analysis

There are several important points to note about this section. The first is the way in which the trapping of Ulysses has echoes of similar experiences of the mythological Ulysses, who was himself trapped several times on his voyage home but who, unlike Ulysses here, got himself out of trouble rather than having to rely on someone else. The second noteworthy point is the character, and related actions, of Big Chris, who in his rescue of Ulysses and payment of Mr. Covington, embodies the selflessness referred to by Mrs. Macauley in chapter seven and which is one of the novel's thematic suggestions of how basic human loneliness can be faced down.

The third point to note here is this section's further exploration of the idea of selflessness - specifically, Spangler's compassionate encounter with the young girl at the bus stop and his promise to Auggie of a future job, both of which echo and foreshadow his other, similar acts. An additional, but subtle, point is related to this. Auggie's last name (Gottlieb) seems to be Jewish in origin. Given that the Jews were among the most decimated victims of World War II, a circumstance that Spangler, if not most of the adult characters in the book, would know, Spangler's promise after learning of Auggie's last name can be seen as an act with roots in a more profound compassion than perhaps might first be apparent.

Finally, the appearance of the three soldiers in the bar foreshadows the appearance of three other soldiers later in the narrative - in fact, in the following chapter. While the novel never makes it explicitly plain, the reader could reasonably infer that the two sets of soldiers are, in fact, the same three soldiers.

Chapters 17 through 20

Chapters 17 through 20 Summary

In "Three Soldiers", as Bess and Mary take Homer's lunch to the telegraph office, they run into a trio of soldiers, who introduce themselves as Fat, Horse and Texas. The two girls agree to go to the movies with the soldiers, who are on a temporary leave, because as Bess says, they're "lonely". At the telegraph office, the soldiers send telegrams home, revealing their real names. At the movies, conversation between the soldiers and the girls turns patriotic, and there are several comments about great Americans and how great the country is. In another part of the country, Marcus Macauley is in a bar with another soldier, talking with two girls in the same way as the soldiers in Ithaca are talking to Mary and Bess. Back in Ithaca, Diana and the seemingly drunk Spangler come into the movie theatre. A scene in the movie, however, in which a nurse calls a doctor to surgery, triggers in Spangler a desire to leave, and he takes the protesting Diana out.

In "Mr. Grogan on War", Homer returns to the telegraph office, and as he eats the lunch Bess brought, Mr. Grogan tells him there's one last telegram to deliver. When Homer realizes it's another death announcement and when he learns that the three soldiers with his sister also sent telegrams, he asks Grogan whether the soldiers, or any of the soldiers, die "for nothing". Grogan speaks at length about the self-contradictory nature of being human, saying that everyone is struggling to be the best person he can. He then sends Homer to the drugstore on an errand. While Homer is gone, Grogan suffers a heart attack but is well enough to take the medicine Homer returns with. Homer takes the death telegram and goes. Grogan watches him, letting the phone ring.

In "To Mother, With Love", Homer arrives at the address where the telegram is to be delivered and is dismayed to see a party going on. He almost turns and leaves, but rings the doorbell anyway. He is told that the person to whom the telegram is to be delivered (Mrs. Beaufrere), is having a birthday party, and he is invited to have some cake and sandwiches. He quickly hands over the telegram and leaves, rushing past a photograph of a red-headed boy that reads "To Mother with love..." Mrs. Beaufrere reads the telegram and begins to cry while in the rest of the house the party continues.

In "It's Your Misfortune and None of my Own", at the same time, Bess, Mary and the three soldiers come out of the movie theatre. After a moment of awkwardness, the soldiers take turns kissing the girls who then leave, jumping and pushing playfully as they sing a song - "It's Your Misfortune and None of my Own".

Chapters 17 through 20 Analysis

There are three main points to note about this section. The first is its continued thematic exploration of the relationship between existential loneliness and selflessness,

specifically, the way in which Bess and Mary both respond with selfless compassion to the loneliness they see in the soldiers who, in turn, respond to the loneliness they believe to be experienced by their parents by sending telegrams. This, in fact, is the second main point to note about this section - the characterization of the soldiers who, in their compassionate, loving communication with their parents, are portrayed as having much more depth than their initially apparent rowdiness might imply. It might not be going too far to suggest, in fact, that that rowdiness is a mask, including the ironic singing of the song "It's Your Misfortune" for their lonely, wounded, fearful humanity - which, the book may be suggesting, is what every human being experiences, only intensified in the face of imminent death, such as the soldiers are facing. This idea of masking also carries through to their names.

This, in turn, relates to the third noteworthy point about this section. The juxtaposition of joy and sorrow in the lives of the specific soldiers in this section is, by implication, that of soldiers in general, an idea supported by Grogan's musings on war in chapter eighteen. In other words, this section presents and develops the thesis that the specific experiences of the soldiers and families of soldiers described here are universal and/or archetypal, a component of the experience of every soldier.

Finally, the name Beaufrere translates from French as "beautiful brother", which can be seen as having a pair of metaphoric implications. The first is fairly direct, in that "beautiful brother" can be seen as referring to the feelings the three Macauley brothers, Marcus, Homer and Ulysses, have towards each other. But on another level, the term can also be seen as describing the "beautiful brother"-hood of soldiers, the way they support and watch out for each other. In that sense, the reference to "Beaufrere" can be seen as foreshadowing of how Marcus looks after his brother soldier Tobey later in the narrative.

Chapters 21 through 23

Chapters 21 through 23 Summary

In "A Better World, a Better People", after returning to the telegraph office, Homer's limp from the leg he hurt during his run-in with Coach Byfield is much worse. He explains to the curious Grogan how he got it, a story that leads him to reveal how he intends to work for the world to be a better place. This leads Grogan to comment on how Homer has already changed as the result of having the messenger job, and Homer agrees that he has. This, in turn, leads him to talk about his family, how they're tough but generally happy, and how it really upsets him when people who aren't tough get hurt.

In "Let There be Light", shortly after Homer leaves, Spangler returns, celebrating with a degree of disbelief the way in which Diana insists that he affirm his love for her. He discusses Homer with Grogan, both men saying how good Homer is at his job. Spangler then sends the uneasy Grogan out for a drink, convincing him that in spite of the recent heart attack which Grogan has confessed to having, a drink would do him good. Shortly after Grogan leaves, the young man from chapter three for whom Spangler had paid the fees for a telegram home returns and threatens to shoot Spangler if he doesn't turn over all the business's money. Spangler gets out all the cash, explaining that he's not handing it over because he's been threatened but because the young man is obviously in trouble and needs the help. This, in turn, leads the young man who is coughing from an illness he says is tuberculosis to speak at length of his troubled life and of his disgust with humanity, a disgust he says has been changed by Spangler's unconditional generosity. He even admits to coming back to the telegraph office to test whether Spangler's initial act of compassion of buying the telegram was genuine. He then leaves without the money or the gun, saying he'll make his own way home and start a new life. Spangler writes and sends a second telegram to the young man's mother, saying the young man will be home soon. Shortly afterwards, Grogan returns, feeling better after two drinks and hearing the soldiers singing around the piano. This leads the two men to reminisce about a former employee named Davenport, who sang hymns all the time while at work. Grogan comments that the words of the hymns were the truth, and he and Spangler leave the office for the night.

In "Death, Don't Go to Ithaca!", Homer sleeps in bed after his long day and dreams of repeatedly being hindered by Coach Byfield in his efforts to re-run the hurdles. Eventually, Homer climbs onto his bike and flies into the sky, evading Byfield completely. As he's cycling through the air, however, he spots another version of himself, also riding a bicycle through the air, a version he realizes, with perfect dream insight, is Death. He races Death to Ithaca, desperate to keep him from visiting, but eventually becomes too tired and collapses, watching and wracked with sobs as Death descends to the town. Ulysses, hearing Homer's sobs, gets Mrs. Macauley, who comes to Homer's bedside and calms him down. As she's getting up to return to her own room, she sees the ghost of Matthew, her husband and Homer's father. Back in Homer's dream, he now sleeps peacefully in a place he remembers from a happy time he shared with Marcus.

Chapters 21 through 23 Analysis

The two main points to consider in this section are the even more impactful exploration of Spangler's selflessness in his confrontation with the young man with the gun and Homer's dream. In terms of the former, it's important to note two things - first, the sequence's dramatization of the book's central thematic exploration of both loneliness (at work in the young man) and selflessness (at work in Spangler). In that sense, this sequence is a clear, vivid portrayal of confrontation between two forces of life as manifest in two lives. It's also important to consider the writing, which is genuinely suspenseful and a notch or two more intense than the writing in the rest of the novel, which tends to be reflective, thoughtful, at times poetic, and just a tiny bit sentimental - in other words, a bit soft. The writing in this section, however, has more edge and a genuine sense of imminent, immediate danger.

In terms of Homer's dream, while the writing is again on the soft side, the contrast with the undeniably frightening images, at least to Homer, is nevertheless quite effective in that it is a clear manifestation of how Homer, at least subconsciously, sees himself - perhaps not as death itself so much as a Messenger of Death.

Minor points at work in this section include Spangler's celebration of Diana's love, which is yet another example of how human connection and relationship, both longed for and achieved, that combats existential human loneliness, and the reference to Davenport and hymns, another manifestation of the novel's contention that Christian faith is also a weapon in that combat. There is another reference to three soldiers who may be the same three soldiers whom Spangler encountered, who had dates with Mary and Bess, and who are perhaps again keeping their loneliness at bay with rowdy camaraderie.

Finally, it's important to note the title of chapter twenty-two, "Let There Be Light", which is traditionally held to be what God says when He begins the process of creating the universe (i.e., igniting the sun). This is another indication of the narrative's consideration of the power of Christian faith.

Chapters 24 through 26

Chapters 24 through 26 Summary

In "The Apricot Tree", one Saturday morning, "the school boys' happiest day", Ulysses wanders through the town and among other various visits, waves to Lionel, "the town half-wit". Soon afterwards, Ulysses watches as Auggie, the leader (only since Homer started working) of the neighborhood's gang of boys leads the gang on a raid of Mr. Henderson's town-famous apricot tree. In spite of Auggie's orders to stay behind, Ulysses tags along. Meanwhile, Mr. Henderson looks forward to the raids on his tree and to the pleasure it gives the boys when he scares them off. When the boys arrive at the tree, they discover that the apricots aren't quite ripe, but decide to steal at least one anyway. Ulysses watches as Auggie climbs the tree and grabs an apricot, only to be left stranded when Henderson comes out and scares the other boys off. Auggie leaps down, grabs Ulysses, and runs. Henderson goes back into his house, smiling.

In "Be Happy! Be Happy!", outside the grocery story, Auggie proudly shows the rest of the gang the small, unripe apricot he took from Henderson's tree. The shop owner, Mr. Ara, shoos them away so they don't block his early morning customers. Auggie and the other boys run off, but Ulysses stays, following Mr. Ara into the shop and watching as Mr. Ara's young son asks for an apple, an orange, candy, a banana - all in the hope that they will be "the heart's final happiness". All are discarded half-finished, when the boy discovers that such happiness is not, in fact, there. In the name of not wasting anything, the Armenian Mr. Ara eats what his son did not. Meanwhile, a customer, also an immigrant, comes in looking for cookies for his ill son. Mr. Ara offers the man the same things he gave his son, but the man refuses, saying the boy only wants cookies, and then leaves. Mr. Ara then speaks in Armenian to his son about his frustration at being in such a wealthy, generous part of the world (America) and still being discontented. When he finishes, he gets Ulysses the oatmeal that Ulysses came in to buy and Ulysses goes. In spite of his confusion at what he just witnessed, he still found it wonderful.

In "There Will Always be Pain in Things", Homer comes down for breakfast and confesses to his mother that he didn't talk with her last night when he came home from work because he felt that he couldn't talk. He confesses that as he rode home he started crying, and wonders why. As she works in the kitchen, Mrs. Macauley explains that there will always be pain and suffering in the world, and that it's the responsibility of each human being to live with compassion, to create the world in a good and loving way, and to recognize that every human being has both good and evil in him. She explains that Homer cried in the night because "he began to know these things". And with that, Homer begins to eat his breakfast, suddenly, "he felt it was all right to eat".

In "All the Wonderful Mistakes", as Homer continues eating, Lionel and Ulysses come in, asking for permission for Ulysses to go to the library. Mrs. Macauley agrees, listening as the worried Lionel confesses his concern that Auggie and the other boys always dismiss him because he makes so many mistakes, his determination to "help them"

when they need it, and his desire to make them sorry they chased him away. After Lionel and Ulysses go, Homer asks his mother if the watchful, thoughtful Ulysses is like Marcus. Mrs. Macauley speaks at length about how all her sons are very different, and how they're all good human beings. "Trust your heart, which is a good one, to be right," she says, "and go ahead - don't stop." As Homer prepares to leave for work, Mrs. Macauley notices his limp. When she asks what happened, Homer says he "took a little spill". After he goes, Mrs. Macauley is again visited by her dead husband, Matthew, who says Marcus is going to be with him. Mrs. Macauley, says she knows and goes back to her work.

Chapters 24 through 26 Analysis

This section of the book contains both the most overt and among the most subtle expressions of its central theme. The former is Mrs. Macauley's poetic speech, which sounds much more like the author speaking than the character, and is about the presence of suffering, which can be taken to include the novel's pervasive and often described loneliness and about the responsibility of each human being to live with compassion. The latter, the subtle expression of theme, can be found in the story of Mr. Henderson and the apricots, in which Mr. Henderson's actions and reactions can be seen as a manifestation of what Mrs. Macauley, and by extension the book, is saying about compassion. In other words, he both lets the boys raid his tree and chases them away because he knows it gives them pleasure, it bonds and unites them, and gives them a sense of both being alive and being less alone, united against a bad guy, even when the bad guy is only playing a game, is still united. Other expressions of this thematic premise can be found in Mr. Ara's compassionate, patient education of his son and the unquestioning friendship between Ulysses and Lionel.

Also in this section, and again due to Mrs. Macauley, there is a fairly overt summing up of the book's narrative intent, the previously discussed narrative of Homer's "coming of age". This is Mrs. Macauley's commentary that Homer has been becoming upset because he has begun to know, feel, and understand some of the ways in which life works, the ways in which human beings experience suffering and loneliness. She is, in essence, telling him he's growing into an adult, that he's "coming of age".

Finally, the section ends with one of the most moving pieces of foreshadowing in the book - the ghostly appearance of Mr. Macauley, in which he tells his wife what she evidently already knows, that Marcus is about to die. While the revelation doesn't exactly come as a shock, it does come as something of a surprise - there is the sense that the astute reader will have an idea that Marcus's death is coming, but doesn't really know when. The more interesting thing about the revelation, however, is the questions it raises about Mrs. Macauley. How long has she had this sense about Marcus? How has her awareness colored the philosophical and spiritual statements she's made to her sons? And how much of what she says is an attempt to talk herself into acceptance as much as it is an attempt to educate and/or prepare her children?

Chapters 28 through 31

Chapters 28 through 31 Summary

In "At the Public Library", on their way to the library, Lionel and Ulysses encounter a funeral. Lionel is shocked and moved to discover that the body in the casket is that of a man he knew as a popcorn seller, and that he had a name - Johnny Merryweather. After a few moments of surprised grief, however, he and Ulysses continue on their way, arriving at the hushed library. As they wander through, they simply enjoying looking at the books. A librarian asks them what they want, and when Lionel explains they're just there to look because neither of them can read, she is at first put out, but then comments that reading hasn't really done her a lot of good, and allows them to keep looking. After she's gone back to work, Lionel pulls down a particularly pretty book and looks reverently at all the letters and words it contains. After he puts the book away, he and Ulysses leave. Ulysses is particularly happy "because it seemed he had learned something new".

In "At the Parlor Lecture Club", Homer arrives at the Parlor Lecture Club building and watches as the female members of the club's regular Saturday afternoon audience hurry in. He learns that he is to deliver the telegram to the guest lecturer, Rosalie Simms-Pibity, as soon as she starts her lecture. As he waits, he listens to the lengthy, extravagant introduction provided by the President of the Club in which the adventures of Simms-Pibity are described in detail, and wonders why so many of those adventures involve her disguising herself. When the lecture finally begins, Homer is shocked to see how skinny, old, and miserable-looking Simms-Pibity actually is, and has to be reminded to deliver the telegram. When he does, Simms-Pibity doesn't open it, but gives him a dime tip. As he leaves, he feels wrong about accepting the dime, and gives it to a beggar, but then, as he moves on, he feels wrong about what he did, runs back, and gives the beggar a quarter of his own.

In "At the Bethel Rooms", Homer arrives at the Bethel Rooms with a telegram for Dolly Hawthorne. While waiting to deliver it, a pretty young woman gives him a letter to take to the post office to be sent to her sister "airmail, special delivery, registered". She tells him to tell no one about it and to not come back with the change from the dollar she gives him to cover the postage. As Homer goes, he encounters Dolly Hawthorne, a large woman who gives him business cards to leave at the establishments he visits, placed where "soldiers and sailors who might need a room overnight" might be found.

In "Mr. Mechano", on their way home from the library, Ulysses and Lionel stop and watch a man in front of the drugstore, presented as a "half-man, half-machine" (Mr. Mechano) advertising a tonic. After watching the man's robot-like movements for a while, Lionel becomes bored and starts for home, becoming upset when his "best friend" Ulysses doesn't come with him. Ulysses stays and watches Mr. Mechano, even though the rest of the crowd is disappearing and night is falling. Suddenly, Ulysses has an overwhelming sense of death around him, panics, and runs for home and family.

Lost and frightened, he is relieved to see Auggie selling the evening paper. Auggie comforts the crying Ulysses, and takes him to Homer at the telegraph office. Spangler and Grogan are there also, and watch as Ulysses's fear dissipates as soon as he sees his brother. As Homer leaves, Spangler notes his "good luck" egg - the egg that keeps the worst luck away. Homer then takes Ulysses home, both of them accompanied by Auggie. On their way, they pass Mr. Ara, teaching his son about how the approaching night will always give way to sunrise and the next day. At home, Ulysses is further comforted by the sight of his mother, and Homer is comforted by knowing that Marcus has sent letters to all of them and a particularly long one to him. He becomes angry, however, when he learns that Bess and Mary have been out looking for jobs - women, he says, ought to stay home and take care of the family. He will provide. Back out in the yard and on his way back to work, Homer finds Ulysses contemplating an egg, "as if the word were also the word for God".

Chapters 28 through 31 Analysis

There are several noteworthy elements in this section. Among them are the sense that both Lionel and Ulysses, as a result of their experiences in these chapters, are beginning the "coming of age" process themselves. Lionel's sudden awareness of death, for example, is a profound, shocking experience of existence, an experience paralleled in the unexplained reaction Ulysses has to Mr. Mechano. Mechano is, in turn, an effectively portrayed example of how the narrative provides a contrast to its overall emphasis on genuine human experience by presenting a character who is entirely artificial. Sims-Pibity is another such contrasting character - witness Homer's observation that she spends so much time in disguise and the business with the delivery of the telegraph, which seems clearly to be an attempt at making Sims-Pibity seem more important than she actually is.

Other interesting elements in this section include Homer's encounter with the beggar after the Sims-Pibity experience, which is another manifestation of the novel's thematic emphasis on the importance of acting out of compassion, and the strange sequence of events at the Hawthorne house. There are two points to consider here, both interrelated. First, the novel never makes the point explicitly, but there is the strong sense that the Hawthorne house is a brothel, or house of prostitution. This, in turn, offers a possible explanation for the mysterious letter Homer is asked to deliver, and the equally mysterious insistence of the young woman on how it is to be sent off. While neither is ever explained, if the reader agrees with the idea that the house is a brothel (which, in many cases, becomes a kind of trap or prison for the young women who work there), it's possible to see the urgency and secrecy of the letter as indicating that it's a plea to be rescued. The point must be made that this is supposition, but one based on clear indications of what the house is.

Further important elements include Ulysses's glimpse of Mr. Ara and his son, in which Mr. Ara again exhibits the kind of patient, instructional compassion he did in his previous appearance, and the surprising surge of sexism that emerges from Homer when he discovers that Bess and Mary have been looking for jobs. This last can, if more deeply

considered, can be seen rather as a manifestation of his emerging adulthood - specifically, the powerful sense of responsibility he has for the well being of his family now that his father is dead.

Finally, there is a recurrence of the egg motif, in both Ulysses's contemplation of the eggs, which in this section clearly defines eggs as a symbol of hope and faith, and the reference to Mr. Spangler's lucky egg. Here, and for the first time, his egg is explicitly linked to the metaphorical meaning of eggs throughout the book, which in turn suggests that when the egg is later destroyed later, it becomes clear that on some level and for some of the characters, hope has ended.

Chapters 32 and 33

Chapters 32 and 33 Summary

In "Leaning on the Everlasting Arms", Homer rides his bicycle to deliver a telegram far outside of town, and Marcus and a number of other soldiers are on "an American passenger train [moving] swiftly over American earth through an American night". Marcus and his best friend, an orphan named Tobey, speak at poetic length about their fear of dying, about how Tobey has come to know and love Ithaca through Marcus's stories, of Marcus's pride in his father and family, and of Tobey's loneliness. Marcus tells Tobey of his hope that Tobey will make his home in Ithaca, and that Tobey will fall in love with and marry Bess. Tobey says he's often thought of the same things, and then prays that what he dreams of will happen. Meanwhile, the other soldiers on the train are singing rowdy songs, but eventually stop. One of them asks Tobey, a good singer, to lead them in some hymns, and Tobey agrees, starting with the one about "Leaning on the Everlasting Arms".

In "A Letter from Marcus to Homer", as the eventful Saturday draws to a close, Homer arrives at the telegraph office to discover that all the day's business has been taken care of and that Grogan is contentedly drunk. Grogan speaks at length of the respect he has come to feel for Homer, commenting that he Grogan has searched all over the world for the kind of generous, open, wise "great" man Homer is becoming. "Now," he adds, "in Ithaca, on my way home, I have found you again, better than ever, greater than ever." He then tells Homer to read the letter from Marcus aloud. And Homer does. In the letter, Marcus tells Homer that all his things are to do with as he Homer pleases, and hands over responsibility for keeping the family together, speaking of his pride in the war he is about to fight as well as of his fear of death. He also speaks of Tobey, of how he is glad it's not Homer fighting in the war, and describes Homer as the best of the Macauleys. When the letter is finished, Homer is feeling as sick and upset as he was when he delivered the telegrams to Mrs. Sandoval and Mrs. Beaufrere, telling Grogan that if Marcus is killed he "shall spit at the world" and "hate it forever. I won't be good. I shall be the worst of them all, the worst that ever lived." With that, he changes out of his uniform and goes home. After he's gone, Grogan sits quietly for a long time, finishing the rest of his bottle of alcohol.

Chapters 32 and 33 Analysis

In chapter thirty-two, for the first time the action of the novel is set in a location outside of Ithaca, but Ithaca and what it represents to the characters, such as home, safety, and love, is still very present. What's interesting here is how, also for the first time, the narrative introduces the idea of a spiritual home that is as welcoming, affirming, and anchoring as the idea of physical home. Tobey embodies the former, Marcus embodies the latter, in a sequence that in fact suggests that one's spiritual home does not have to be one's physical home.

There are also references to this exploration of different aspects of home in the conversation between Homer and Grogan. There, Grogan's comments about looking for a person of quality like Homer all over the world can be seen as suggesting that he too has been searching for a kind of spiritual home, a place where he can feel comfortable relating to and being with "good" people. Incidentally, Grogan's comments also carry echoes of the search for home in The Odyssey. Meanwhile, the foreshadowing of Marcus's death at the end of chapter twenty-seven gives the events of both chapters thirty-two and thirty-three a profound poignancy and deepens the sense of imminent sadness and loss.

Other important elements include the reintroduction of the motif of faith, specifically Christian faith, again indicating it can be an important component of the struggle against the existential loneliness which, the novel suggests, is at the heart of human existence. Finally, there is Homer's surprising outburst of anger and looming bitterness, which seems to be a flare up of childish fear more than anything else, since throughout the novel, including sequences both before and after this one, he evinces a more mature understanding and perspective. Or perhaps he is afraid of the responsibility he is being given lasting for much longer than he thought - longer, that is, than Marcus's time in the war. In other words, Homer comes of age even more in this section as the result of the sudden, perhaps unconscious, awareness that his brother is going to die and he is going to be left at the head of the family.

Chapters 34 through 36

Chapters 34 through 36 Summary

In "Here is a Kiss", time has passed in Ithaca and around the world, people have changed, and the telegraph office continues to send and receive news to and from home - of death, of love, of reunion, of separation. On one particular Sunday, as the congregation recites a prayer, Ulysses imagines the bald head of the man in front of him as the setting for adventures. His imaginings become a daydream which becomes a sleeping dream, from which he's roused when Lionel passes the collection plate. At the end of the chapter, Lionel and the other boys bring the collection to the front of the church, "and then [take] their places beside their parents".

In "The Laughter of the Lion", as Auggie repairs an old tennis net with the idea of turning it into something that could catch animals, he's taunted by the restless Enoch Hopper, who says the net won't catch anything and wants Auggie to do something with him. Auggie, however, wants to finish his net. Lionel comes along, and Enoch ropes him into playing catch. Shortly after they've gone, Auggie finishes the net and gets another boy to lure Enoch, who is "swifter and harder to catch than a lion" into the net. The other boy agrees and Enoch is temporarily caught, but struggles his way out of the net. Auggie and the other boys join the laughing Enoch as they wander through Ithaca looking for something else to do.

In "The Trees and the Vines", driving through the countryside with Diana, Spangler comments on the variety of trees he sees, talks about how happy he thinks he is, and then comments on the variety of ethnic communities out for a picnic - Greeks, Italians, Armenians, etc. The last group of picnickers is "perhaps the most wonderful of them all ... Americans!" which Spangler describes as being made up of all the other ethnicities.

Chapters 34 through 36 Analysis

It may seem at first glance that this section doesn't have much to do either narratively or thematically with the rest of the book. The events here seem to be little more than vignettes, glimpses of small town life going on as normally as possible under the circumstances. Therein, however, lies the key to understanding the true value of these chapters - each of the characters here, each of the incidents, is an example of someone striving to find something, anything really, to keep loneliness at bay. Ulysses's fantasies, the children's play, the musings of Spangler and Diana, all are attempts to find meaning not only in life in general, but life lived within an atmosphere of death (i.e., the war).

It's worth noting, meanwhile, that for the first time in the book, patriotism, and American patriotism, which is arguably the most vivid, the most deeply seated, the most loudly proclaimed and the most profoundly defended in the world, appears as a value similar in

function to that of faith - as a weapon in the battle against loneliness. In other words, Spangler's comments carry with them the implication that to be American is to be automatically less lonely, to have a real home. It must be noted that the book does not make the point explicitly, but combining the enthusiasm of Spangler's comments with their placement in the narrative (i.e., as the action is building to its point of climax) suggests that the idea is an important component of the book's overall thematic perspective.

Chapters 37 through 39

Chapters 37 through 39 Summary

In "Ithaca, My Ithaca", nine passengers get off an arriving train. Two soldiers head into town, celebrating being back at home in Ithaca. A third soldier, limping heavily, moves away more slowly. The first two soldiers rush to their homes, and a celebration of their arrival begins. It's interrupted momentarily by the discovery that the soldiers are at each other's homes and kissing each other's mothers, but soon resumes.

In "Love is Immortal, Hate Dies Every Minute", as Homer, Ulysses, Mrs. Macauley, Bess and Mary are out for a walk, they find Lionel, who has been dismissed from Enoch's games with Auggie and the others. As they walk together, they find what Homer insists is a lucky penny, and which he tells Ulysses to pick up. As they pass the telegraph office, Homer notices that Grogan is there, and goes in to see if he's all right. He discovers Grogan unconscious and tries to wake him up, noticing as he does so that Grogan was in the middle of transcribing a telegraph to Mrs. Macauley, announcing Marcus's death. As he takes this in, Homer also realizes that Grogan is dead. At that moment, Spangler returns, having finished his drive with Diana. He sends her home, calls for a doctor, and retypes the telegram for the Macauleys, eating the good luck egg and discarding the shell as he does so. He then takes Homer for a walk, and Homer wonders at length how he is supposed to go on. Spangler assures him that one way or another, Marcus will live on, and the world will continue to be a place where good is possible, and invites him to pitch a game of horseshoes, even though neither of them is any good at it.

In "The End and the Beginning", the limping soldier walks through the town, commenting to himself on all the familiar landmarks he sees. He passes Homer and Spangler, who stop their game to talk with him. The soldier talks about going home, and moves on. Homer then asks Spangler how he is to go home and tell his family what he knows, and Spangler tells him to wait, saying poetically that he should not say anything until the shock and pain of learning of Marcus's death passes, making room for good feelings and memories. Homer waits.

At the Macauley home, Mrs. Macauley plays her harp, Bess plays the piano and Mary sings, all with beauty and grace, as Ulysses watches. The limping soldier arrives, attracted to the sense of home in the house, and sits on the porch to listen. Bess notices him and comes out. The soldier explains that he knew Marcus, and hands her a ring that Marcus had given him. When she asks whether Marcus is dead, the soldier assures her that he is not. Bess runs into the house to tell the others that a friend of Marcus's had arrived. At that moment, Homer returns, recognizes the soldier as Tobey George, and asks how to tell the family about the telegram. Tobey tells him that Marcus isn't really dead, implying that he is, in fact, alive in spirit and in memory, and to tear up the telegram. Homer does, and keeps the pieces in his pocket. He then helps Tobey into the house, "each of them smiling, the soldier with a tender painfulness and the

messenger with a kind of happiness he could not yet understand". As they go in, Ulysses joins them. Mrs. Macauley, Bess, and Mary finish making music, look at the trio of men, and welcome them home.

Chapters 37 through 39 Analysis

The book's ending begins with a mystery, in the question of the identity of the third soldier, although the mystery may not be too difficult to solve - the astute reader will know it's either Tobey or Marcus, and will perhaps know that it is the former while hoping that it is in fact the latter. There is also a strange humor in chapter thirty-seven when it comes to the idea that the soldiers have gone to their opposite homes, but this sequence is, in fact, a significant statement of the novel's secondary theme relating to the value of home. Here, the novel suggests that it doesn't matter where one is welcomed or where one feels at home. It's the welcome, and the feeling of home, that matters, an idea that in fact foreshadows Tobey's arrival at the Macauley's home and the welcome he gets there in chapter thirty-nine.

In chapter thirty-eight, the Macauleys get the news of Marcus's death, and there are several points to note here. First is the destruction of Spangler's good luck egg which, as previously discussed, given the egg's symbolic value as a representation of hope, can initially be perceived as a suggestion of the destruction of hope. This may be true for Spangler, but the compassion of Grogan, in which, incidentally, he embodies the book's thematic point about the value of compassion easing loneliness, and later of the Macauley family, suggests that the symbolic value of the egg's destruction was ironic. In other words, Spangler may think hope for the Macauleys has died, but it is in fact able to transcend tragedy and bring greater, deeper life into Ithaca and into the lives of those who live there.

Finally, there is the arrival of the soldier at the Macauley home. The first point to note here is how narration avoids giving the soldier a name for as long as possible, an authorial choice that suggests the acts of compassion and welcome being performed by the Macauleys are, in fact, universal and archetypal, or at least that they should be. Ultimately, however, the moment is a moving if perhaps vaguely unlikely manifestation of the novel's central thematic contention. This is the idea that in the face of ultimate, profound human loneliness, as experienced both by Tobey and by the Macauleys in the face of Marcus's death, reaching out in compassion and selflessness, as Mrs. Macauley has advocated throughout, will help each human being experiencing that loneliness through experiences of life, death, and everything in between.

Characters

Homer Macauley

Fourteen-year-old Homer is the novel's protagonist, the individual whose actions and experiences are the primary focus of the book's narrative. A shorthand way of describing his essential character and situation is that he has become "the man" of his family. Because his father is dead under circumstances that are never fully explained and oldest son Marcus has gone to serve in the US Military during World War II, as the oldest male left in the Macauley home, Homer has been made and feels, both financially, emotionally and to some extent morally responsible for his family's well being. He takes his responsibilities extremely seriously, continuing with his job as a messenger in spite of his extreme discomfort with frequently having to deliver bad news to the good people of his home town. These aspects of his life, the acceptance of responsibility and the intimate knowledge of both death and grief he acquires as the result of doing so, combine to take Homer on a significant journey of transformation over the course of the narrative. To again employ a commonly used shorthand, Homer "comes of age", growing into the world of adult emotion and perspective after being thrust perhaps violently into the world of adult situation and responsibility. Nevertheless, the novel makes it very clear that parts of Homer are still childlike and boyish, suggesting that while life is taking him a long way, he still has a long way to go.

Ulysses and Marcus Macauley

At about four years old, Ulysses is Homer's younger brother, while Marcus, in his late teens, is the oldest of the three Macauley sons. Both play important roles in Homer's life, with Homer feeling responsibility for Ulysses alongside a profound responsibility to Marcus. Both brothers play important roles in shaping Homer's life and journey of transformation. Ulysses is a much more active presence in Homer's life, an actual physical presence - in other words, Ulysses is there, sometimes causing trouble, often creating complication, generally triggering affection. Marcus, on the other hand, is physically absent but more emotionally present - the responsibility triggered by his absence is constantly in Homer's mind. Marcus generally triggers inspiration, often awakens admiration, and on one notable occasion at the end of the book, is the catalyst for redemption, for both his friend Tobey George and the rest of his family. Meanwhile, it's interesting to note that on some level, Ulysses and Marcus are more alike each other than they are to Homer. Both seem to function from a place of being more connected to their emotions, while Homer tends to function more from a place of thought and judgment, and is led into an awareness of his emotions by circumstances.

Mr. and Mrs. Macauley, Bess Macauley

Mr. and Mrs. Macauley are the parents of Marcus, Homer and Ulysses, while Bess is the boys' sister. Mrs. Macauley is warm, profoundly wise, and compassionately devoted to the well-being of her children. Bess is somewhat flighty but sensitive enough to the ways of the world to respond with compassion of her own when confronted with what she believes to be suffering, specifically, the loneliness of soldiers.

Mr. Macauley, meanwhile, is dead, but nevertheless occasionally appears to his wife, at times offering her both comfort and warnings of suffering to come. It's important to note, however, that even when he's engaged in the latter, Mrs. Macauley perceives his presence as offering the former.

Mr. Spangler, Mr. Grogan

These two men work with Homer at the telegraph office. Spangler, whose age is never given but who seems to be in his thirties, is the office manager, kind and empathetic, fearlessly compassionate. Grogan is a much older man, past retirement age, an alcoholic unable and/or unwilling to give up work, because if he did, he'd have nothing left. Both offer profound and patient wisdom to Homer as he, like they must have done, comes to understand life through daily encounters with death.

Diana Steed, Mary Arena

Neither of these two characters, young women of Ithaca, are particularly well developed, but they each serve a similar important function - to act as idealized inspiration to the men in their lives. The apparently wealthy, impulsive, passionate Diana inspires Spangler to a transforming experience of romantic love. The reserved Mary, who lives next door to the Macauley family, is portrayed as "the good girl", the loving, patient wife-to-be whom Marcus is desperate to come home to.

The Young Man with the Telegram

At the beginning of the novel, Homer watches as Spangler pays for a young man's "send money so I can come home" telegram to be sent, learning as he watches the first of many lessons he is about to learn about compassion. Later in the novel, however, Homer is absent when the same young man returns, driven by a profound personal desperation to an attempt to steal money from the telegraph office at gunpoint. Once again exhibiting profound compassion, not to mention considerable courage, Spangler talks the young man out of what he plans to do and offers him support.

Mrs. Sandoval, Mr. Corbett, Big Chris, Mr. Covington, Mrs. B

These are some of the more important citizens of the community where Homer and the rest of the Macauleys live and work. Homer delivers telegrams to some of them, including Mrs. Sandoval, Mrs. Beaufrere, Dolly Hawthorne, witnesses encounters between the two shop owners Mr. Ara and Mr. Covington and their customers such as Big Chris, and is aware of others like Mr. Corbett and Mr. Henderson, who have more to do with other characters only in passing.

Coach Byfield, Miss Hicks, Mr. Ek

These three characters interact with Homer at his school - Byfield is the bullying, opportunistic lying athletic coach, Miss Hicks is the disciplined, surprisingly multi-faceted, world-weary-wise history teacher, and Mr. Ek is the firm, integrity-driven principal.

Hubert Ackley, Helen Eliot, Joe Terranova

Homer goes to school with these characters. Hubert is on one level a rival but on another a fellow searcher for wisdom. Helen is the girl Homer simultaneously loves and despises. Joe is the class clown, in some ways a kindred spirit.

Auggie Gottlieb, Enoch Hopper

These two characters are other boys in town, younger than Homer but, in their own way, each as driven by a sense of responsibility and a determination to better themselves. Auggie's drive manifests on a somewhat larger scale to that of Enoch, whose ambitions seem limited to running the town boys' gang. Auggie wants to follow in Homer's footsteps and be a messenger.

Lionel Cabot

Lionel is "the town half-wit", slower and less intellectually active than the other boys but at the same time more sensitive and insightful. He hangs out with Ulysses, both having adventures that their parents might not necessarily approve of. He is representative of the pure joy possible in simply valuing each experience of life as it comes.

The Three Soldiers

These three young men travel through Ithaca on their way to military duty elsewhere. They are perceived by several characters, particularly Bess and Mary, to be in a similar

situation to that of the away-from-home Marcus, and as such in their eyes earn their compassion. Fat (Norman), Texas (Bernard) and Horse (Quentin) all display an all-too-human vulnerability and warmth beneath a mask of "boys will be boys" kind of bravado, an idea supported by the fact that they initially rowdily present themselves by their nicknames, but when they reveal their sensitivity and vulnerability, they do so while using their real names.

Rosalie Simms-Pibity, Mr. Mechano

These two outsiders, travelers from the outside-Ithaca world, provide interesting, very telling notes of contrast such as coldness, artificiality, and devious manipulation within the overall context of warmth, openness and genuineness that colors most of the rest of the book.

Tobey George

This character is Marcus's best friend, a fellow soldier who has almost an exactly opposite background - no family or home to speak of, growing up in loneliness and isolation. They do, however have a common goal - to establish a life of safety and security for themselves in Ithaca once their part in the war is over. They also share a faith in God and in love, a faith that for Tobey is rewarded at the end of the book with unconditional, compassionate acceptance into the Macauley home.

Objects/Places

Ithaca, California

This is the small town where the action of the narrative takes place, the idealized "home" for many of the characters, particularly Marcus and Tobey.

The Telegraph Office

The telegraph office where Homer, Grogan and Spangler work is the setting for many of the novel's key scenes. On one level, the office could be perceived as the place where good and bad news first stops in Ithaca on their way to the homes where such news will change the lives of the people who live there, an information way-station.

The Macaulay Home

This is the warm, inviting house where Homer, Ulysses, and the rest of the Macauley family lives. For most of the novel it represents the love and safety of family, but at the novel's conclusion, when the family welcomes the orphaned Tobey as one of their own, it becomes a representation of the unconditional love at the core of compassion.

World War II

The death and destruction of the Second World War is a looming, constant presence in the background of the narrative. While the point is never explicitly made, there is the clear sense that the compassion evident in Ithaca and the lives of many of the people there is intended to be perceived as a clear, vivid contrast to the catastrophic horrors of Nazi hatred.

Telegrams

The sending, receiving, and delivery of telegrams (sort of a pre-cell-phone text message), most of which bring news of death, play key roles in triggering and defining the narrative and thematic movement of the book.

Eggs

Eggs appear several times throughout the book as apparent symbols of new life and/or of hope.

Mr. Covington's Market, Mr. Ara's Market

These two markets are the settings for scenes of contrasting thematic meaning. When Ulysses is trapped in the money-focused Mr. Covington's market (note the similarity to the world "covet"), it represents the dangers of being too focused on material prosperity. When, however, he watches Mr. Ara's demonstrations of material and spiritual generosity at Mr. Ara's market, it represents the value of open-heartedness and compassion. In this context, it's interesting to note that Mr. Ara is clearly an immigrant.

Mrs. Macaulay's Harp

The harp, purchased for Mrs. Macauley after a long period of scrimping and saving, represents another manifestation of openhearted, selfless compassion and joy.

Hymns

Throughout the narrative, the characters sing hymns as a means of expressing their joy and faith in the Christian God, and in the love, compassion and safety they believe God has promised everyone. This, in turn, is a manifestation of the frequently, if subtly, reiterated thematic perspective that the Christian faith can help individuals survive, and perhaps even conquer, the fundamental loneliness at the heart of human existence.

Trees

On two notable narrative occasions, trees play an important metaphoric role in the narrative. In chapter twenty-four, when Auggie and the boys climb Mr. Henderson's tree to steal apricots, the tree can be seen as a representation of the sort of challenges they, and by extension everyone, will face as they test themselves and emerge into adulthood. Meanwhile, in chapter thirty-six, trees seem to represent the steadfast American values of freedom, courage and compassion upon which the "vines" of immigrants can grow and thrive.

Themes

Loneliness

The action, characterizations, and narration of the book are all grounded in one central theme, the contention that an unavoidable part of the human experience is a fundamental, inevitable loneliness . In some ways, this is something of an "existentialist" perspective, existentialism being a school of philosophy that contends that the individual human experience of existence is all there is - there is no pre-life, no after life, no spiritual context in which existence plays out or which gives it meaning. In existentialist philosophy, therefore, loneliness is a fundamental and inescapable component of existence. Every individual is just that, an individual, isolated and alone, with any attempts to develop either meaning or companionship (as a means to alleviate the loneliness of being an individual) ultimately ending up futile.

That said, much of the book's narrative consists of ways in which characters search for and/or embrace circumstances in which they feel less lonely. Ulysses' joy at the response of the man on the train in chapter one, Spangler's celebration of his relationship with Diana, the Macauley's welcoming of Tobey George into their family in chapter thirty-nine are all examples of how each character, in his/her own way, reaches for some person, some feeling, some encounter that might make them feel less alone. Ultimately, the narrative suggests that none of the characters' efforts fully succeed, that any success in this area is temporary, and that for the most part success is actually impossible.

Selflessness

Many of the characters' efforts at being less lonely are manifestations of the book's two secondary themes. The first explores the idea of selflessness, of giving without expectation of return, of acting out of compassion. Spangler's generosity towards the young man with the telegram, Mary and Bess's generosity towards the three soldiers, Big Chris's compassion towards the trapped Ulysses, Marcus' compassion towards Tobey - indeed, the compassion of the entire Macauley family towards Tobey - all are manifestations of this theme.

Considered within the context of the main theme discussed above, the loneliness of human existence, it becomes clear that the book's repeated incidents of selflessness are manifestations of the desire to alleviate loneliness. In other words, those who give, such as Spangler, Mary, Bess, Big Chris, Marcus, etc., are all acting out of a desire to ease what they perceive as loneliness and struggle in other people. On another level, however, most often an unconscious one, the "givers" are also acting out of a desire to ease their own loneliness, their own sense of meaninglessness, to give meaning to their lives by giving meaning to others. The most vivid examples of this are the drunken Mr. Grogan who, in his profound loneliness, reaches for connection with Homer, and Mrs.

Macauley who, in spite of her profound wisdom, is so lonely for both her dead husband and her absent son that she extends an almost super-human compassion to her other sons and to strangers.

Home

The other secondary theme that manifests and develops the book's primary theme is the idea of home, a word loaded with all kinds of universal associations. While for many people these associations can be negative, with the concept of "home" carrying with it implications and/or memories of dysfunction and unhappiness, society in general and "The Human Comedy" in particular focuses on the more positive associations of safety, of love, and of support. It's not an exaggeration to say that these positive associations, much more than the negative ones, are mythic in their status, power, and personal relevance, reflections and manifestations of a recognized archetype, or expression of a universal human truth - that everyone longs to reach both the physical and spiritual place in which they feel secure, cherished, valued, and at peace.

All of the characters in the novel, albeit to varying degrees, are reaching for their physical and spiritual home. Some are actually traveling there, most are missing it, many reach out to contact it - all are driven by their connection to it and what it represents. In the context of the novel's exploration of its primary theme, this drive for connection can be seen as another way of combating humanity's essential, existential loneliness - home, for the characters in the book and, in all likelihood, for most of its readers, is a place where, at least for a while, that loneliness is held at bay. The irony, of course, and it's an irony the book implies, is that home is also the place where loneliness is most present - witness the loneliness, for example, at the core of life in the Macauley home.

Style

Point of View

There are two equally important aspects to the novel's point of view. On a technical (narrative) level, the story is told from the third person omniscient point of view - that is, with narration exploring the perspectives and experiences of all the characters. Most are glimpsed only in passing, with the incidents in their lives and their reactions parsed as vignettes, vividly drawn glimpses of humanity rather than the full-blooded reflections on feeling and reaction that the narrative develops for the major characters. By contrast, Homer's experiences and reactions are explored in considerable depth, meaning that most of the narrative (in terms of both event and theme) is communicated from his point of view, with each of the other major characters (Mrs. Macauley, Ulysses, Mr. Spangler) and a couple of the lesser ones (Lionel, Tobey) also receiving their moments of narrative focus.

On a thematic level, the book's point of view seems to be that human existence is fundamentally an individual, and therefore ultimately lonely, experience. References are made repeatedly in both narration and dialogue to characters not only feeling alone, and experiencing that feeling in the context of both their individual circumstances and the larger context of simply being a member of the human race. There is also the sense, however, that the narrative strives to balance that point of view with the perspective that loneliness can be answered with attempts at lasting, impactful human contact. In other words, the book's thematic point of view (reflected in its narrative point of view) that being human is a solitary business that can be alleviated, at least to some degree, by attempts at selfless generosity and by both creating and inhabiting a sense of "home".

Setting

The two most important elements of the novel's setting are the time and the place in which it is set. In terms of the former, the setting of the action within the context of World War II places the individual experiences of the characters within the larger, albeit mostly implied, context of humanity's experiences of power, violence, evil, and courage. A related component of this setting is the constant presence and/or awareness of death. Again, this is mostly implied, but there are points at which death's presence, not to mention its repercussions, are suddenly and powerfully immediate for both the characters and the reader. In other words, the presence of death, immediate or remote or in the background triggers for many of the characters the loneliness and fear of loneliness at the narrative's thematic core.

In terms of the place in which the novel is set, the most important element at work is the name of the town where the action for the most part takes place - specifically "Ithaca", which is also the name of the ancient city that long-lost hero Ulysses journeyed for ten years after the Trojan War to reach. The story of that journey, recounted in the epic

poem "The Odyssey", is at the core of the mythic, archetypal sensibility at work in the narrative's thematic exploration of the idea and implications of "home". Also important in terms of physical setting is the idea of "America", which in the few occasions when it is directly, explicitly referred to is another manifestation of the thematic ideals associated with "home" - safety, strength, pride, identity, freedom, and above all a place to be both proud of and to fight for.

Language and Meaning

There are several interesting uses of language throughout the book. For the most part, narration is written in straightforward, unembroidered prose, at times and perhaps paradoxically both poetically and pointedly evocative. Dialogue generally evokes the sense of real people speaking, particularly when it comes to the words spoken by the younger male characters (Homer, Ulysses, Lionel, Auggie, etc). There are occasions, however, when authorial voice and/or thematic perspective seem to be asserting themselves at the expense of character. This is particularly, and to some degree quite blatantly, apparent in the character of Mrs. Macauley, who speaks with a transcendent wisdom and poetic phrasing that, on many occasions, feels unlikely in the mouth of a middle class widow of the 1940s. To look at it another way - the words given to her by the author are beautiful, the sentiments she expresses are warm, humanist, and thematically relevant, but they don't sound as though they would actually be spoken by a real human being.

Another interesting use of language is the repeated inclusion of words to Christian hymns. It must be noted that there is never an outright, explicit development of a Christian angle to either the book's story or its themes. Nevertheless, the inclusion of so many hymns, not to mention the characters' references to hymns, implies that at least on some level, the author is suggesting that the essential loneliness at the core of individual human existence can be alleviated, at least to some degree, by faith, specifically, the Christian faith.

Finally, a particularly noteworthy use of language is the way in which narration frequently refers to Homer not by name but by job - as "the messenger".

Structure

On one level, the novel's structure is essentially straightforward, moving in a linear, chronological fashion from event to event, from morning through noon into night, from beginning to end without flashback or flash-forward; in other words, without moving away from its central timeline. Its structure is traditional - beginning, middle, end, a chronicle of journeys of transformation experienced over the course of events by the characters - particularly, in this case, by Homer.

On another level, the novel's structure is reflective of its point of view, and vice versa. While the movement of time over the course of the book is straightforward, on several occasions the narrative shifts its focus from one event taking place at a particular time

to another event in the life of another character taking place at the same time. In short, the narrative sometimes portrays simultaneous situations in successive chapters. This gives a broader sense of the life of the community of Ithaca, the sense that all its inhabitants, and, by extension, those they love and think about and miss, are living their lives if not in unison, at least in parallel. It might not be going too far to suggest that in this context, it's possible to see another manifestation of theme, this being the idea that while one individual is having his/her experience of life in one part of town, alone, someone else is having their experience of individual life somewhere else. In other words, experiences of solitariness and/or loneliness are taking place at the same time everywhere, the irony or paradox being that every individual everywhere is experiencing existential loneliness at the same time. Everyone is alone, together.

Quotes

"After a moment [Ulysses] smiled the smile of the Macauley people - the gentle, wise, secret smile which said 'yes' to all things." p. 5

"[Ulysses] looked at [the egg] a moment, picked it up, brought it to his mother and very carefully handed it to her, by which he meant what no man can guess and no child can remember to tell." p. 5

"...nothing good ever ends. If it did, there would be no people in the world - no life at all, anywhere. And the world is full of people and full of wonderful life." p. 20

"The messenger ... was most eager to see who this person would be - this woman named Rosa Sandoval who was now to hear of murder in the world and to feel it in herself." p. 23

"...he felt great compassion, not for the poor woman alone, but for all things and the ridiculous way of their enduring and dying." p. 27

"'The loneliness you feel has come to you because you are no longer a child. But the whole world has always been full of that loneliness. The loneliness does not come from the War. The War did not make it. It was the loneliness that made the war. It was the despair in all things for no longer having in them the Grace of God." p. 35

"...it were no use trying to talk about the feeling [Homer] had - the feeling that there would be pain out of the War for many people who would never get near it." p. 45

"A magnificent empire? Where? Ithaca? Ithaca in California? Away out to hell and gone? Without any great people, without any great discoveries, without sundials, without numerals, without Zodiacs, without humor, without anything? Where was this great empire?" p. 61

"'I kept you in after school because I wanted to talk to both of you - one of you from a good well-to-do family, the other from a good poor family. Getting along in this world will be even more difficult for him than for you. I wanted you to know one another a little better ... I wanted to talk to both of you.'" p. 71.

"'In a democratic state every man is the equal of every other man up to the point of exertion, and after that every man is free to exert himself to do good or not, to grow nobly or foolishly as he wishes." pp. 71-72

"Mr. Covington was under the impression that Ulysses belonged to Big Chris and Big Chris was under the impression that Ulysses belonged to Mr. Covington so that between the two of them they had no reason to account for the small boy's presence. As for Ulysses himself, he was under the impression that he belonged wherever there was something interesting to see." p. 81

"Big Chris, sweating, working hard over the trap, looked from one brother to the other, deeply moved by the calm of the boy in the trap and the furious devotion of his brother." p. 90

"Even though he was running, it was impossible for Spangler not to notice the girl's loneliness - which seemed to him, even though he was in a hurry, like the loneliness of all things." p. 105

"That was one of the most wonderful things that had ever happened to Ulysses Macauley in his four years of life in the world. He waved to a man and the man waved back to him - not once, but many times. He would remember that as long as he lived." p. 113.

"[The soldiers] were sporting around in the street at a game improvised out of their happiness at being free for the night, out of the noble and ridiculous world and its constant comedy, and out of the refreshing rain." pp. 115-116

"'...tomorrow we return to barracks, to the awful but necessary business of war, to the holy work of destroying the murderous microbe in man which seeks to crush man's free spirit.'" p. 117

"[Spangler] had had a few to drink and the evening had been a rather important and pleasant one for him, full of troubles which were now working themselves out, it seemed ..." p. 124

"'Nobody dies for nothing. They die seeking grace, seeking to be immortal, seeking truth and justice - and one day that great body of an - all of us, every last one of us - shall reach home, shall have grace, shall be immortal, and this wonderful evil world shall be a place of decency and goodness among men.'" p. 129

"...the three soldiers began leaping over one another at a swift, crazy game of leap-frog, pushing down the dark, immortal street nearer and nearer to the War." p. 136

"'...I'm not so smart. I guess I'm just as backward as anybody in a lot of things - important things, too. I want to know and I'll always want to know. I'll always keep trying, but how can you ever know? How can any man ever really get it all straight so that it comes out even and makes sense?'" pp. 140 - 141.

"They were afraid of Henderson, they were afraid of sin, of capture and guilt, and they were afraid they were a little too early. They were afraid the apricots weren't ripe yet." pp. 168-169.

"There they were, in Ithaca, California, probably seven thousand miles from what had been for centuries their home in the world. Naturally there was a loneliness in each of them, but no one could know for sure that the same loneliness might not be in them had they been seven thousand miles away, back home." p. 176

"[Mr. Ara] looked at the man with understanding, with sympathy, and yet with a kind of peasant rage, not against the man but against the world itself, against disease, against pain, against loneliness, against the heart wanting what it can never have." p. 180

"'I thought a fellow would never cry when he got to be grown up, but it seems that's when a fellow starts, because that's when a fellow starts finding out about things.'" p. 187

"'As for us ... the stay-at-homes, the mothers, the bringer-uppers, so to speak, of children, the life of Simms-Pibity is like a dream - our dream - the unfulfilled dream of each of us who have only stayed at home, given birth to our children, and looked after our houses.'" p. 208

"The world was surely wonderful and it was surely full of good things to be seen again and again, but now the world was a thing to escape, only [Ulysses] could think of no direction to take. He wanted swiftly to reach somebody of his family." p. 222

"When Ulysses saw his brother, a wonderful thing happened to his face. All the terror left his eyes, because now he was home." p. 225

"... from their eyes, from their high spirits, and from their laughter and shouting and singing, you knew this was not an army alone, but a nation, and surely a good and great one. You knew that while they had been taught to stand in line and to behave on schedule with no personal rights beyond the needs of the unity, they had not become a machine and were still good human beings with at least average intentions." p. 235.

"'I thought every man was in the world alone - the same as me - to start out all by himself. I guess I felt bad for a long time, after I found out. It made me lonely. I mean it made me lonelier. Maybe that's the reason I like to sing. You don't feel your loneliness so much when you're singing.'" p. 239

"'Even though Bess doesn't know it yet, she's mine. And from now on, every breath I take will be to keep me alive until I get to Ithaca and her. Ithaca's my home. That is where I live. That's where I want to be when I die - if I can.'" p. 241.

"This Saturday was one of the longs and most eventful days of Homer Macauley's life ... the sleep of last night, troubled and full of grief, was now forever a part of his wakefulness. He had tried with all his might to keep the messenger of Death from reaching Ithaca and its people ... but now it was no longer a dream." p. 246

"'As a man gets closer to the end of his time he feels more and more grateful for the good people who're going to go on when he's gone.'" p. 248

"The line of ugliness had been clothed in grace by the line of charity. The force of brutality had been tempered and sweetened by the greater force of gentility. The evil color of wrong had been lost in the bright color of right, and together they had become a color more beautiful than the color of right alone." p. 255

"'I don't go much for that happiness stuff, but whatever happiness may be, I've got a pretty good idea it's something like this.'" p. 269

"'What's a man supposed to do ... I don't know who to hate. I keep trying to find out who it is, but I can't find out who it is. I just don't know. What's a man going to do? What can I do about it? What can I say? How does a man go on living? Who does he love?'" p. 282

"'The whole world is different now. Something good has gone out of them. Everything in Ithaca is changed now because my brother is not going to look at anything any more.'" p. 284

"The mother, standing, looking at her two remaining sons, one on each side of the stranger, the soldier who had known her son who was now dead, smiled and understood ... her smile was for him who was now himself her son ... as if he were Marcus himself and the soldier his two brothers moved toward the door, toward the warmth and light of home." p. 291

Topics for Discussion

Why do you think the author refer so often in narration to Homer as "the messenger", rather than by his name or by another term?

What do you think is the significance of the old man's story of the rabbits in chapter nine?

What do you think is meant by the author making the immigrant Mr. Ara the more compassionate and wise of the two shopkeepers, with Mr. Covington oriented more toward money and prestige?

What do you think are the metaphoric implications of the title of chapter twenty-two, "Let There be Light"? In other words, what "light" do you think comes into existence in this chapter?

Given that throughout the narrative, eggs have represented both new life and hope, what do you think the author means when in chapter thirty-eight, just as the Macauleys are about to get the news of Marcus's death, Spangler peels and eats his "good luck egg"?

In what ways do Homer, Mrs. McCauley, the three soldiers, Mr. Grogan and other characters reach for someone else, some experience, some form of contact to ease their existential loneliness?

Why do you think Ulysses finds the encounter between Mr. Ara and the immigrant shopping for his son "wonderful"?

Do you believe that the book's central thematic contention is correct - that at the core of the individual human experience is an existential, unavoidable loneliness? Do you believe that there is indeed always be "Pain in Things"? Why or why not?

Do you have an experience of a spiritual home, a place where you feel all the things that "home" is supposed to be, that isn't in fact your physical "home"? Discuss why your spiritual home feels the way it does to you and the differences between that home and your physical one.

Does the final choice of the Macauley family, to welcome Tobey into their home, seem realistic or idealistic to you? Do you believe it? Why or why not?