

# **The Hustler Film Summary**

## **The Hustler by Robert Rossen**

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## Context

*The Hustler* is the story of Eddie Felson, a professional pool shark, who makes all his money on the road. He is young and cocky and doesn't know how to admit defeat. Eddie has wanted to play Minnesota Fats for years, and now that he has a chance, he refuses to pass it up. The first time they play, though, Eddie loses all his money to Fats, but he swears he will win again someday. At the end of the film, Eddie finally wins big and takes a step away from the game.

During that game, Eddie meets Bert Gordon. Eventually, he allows Bert to finance him so that he can play big money players at the Kentucky Derby and hopefully around the world someday. Bert doesn't approve of Eddie completely, so he sets out to change him into a true player.

While in town trying to make some money, Eddie also meets Sarah Packard. She is a beautiful young woman, and he moves in with her. They have tumultuous relationship, and she eventually becomes jealous of pool since it takes all his attention. In the end, she commits suicide to put an end to the difficulties of her life and her love.

Robert Rossen wrote and directed *The Hustler* but is best known for his success as a writer. He also successfully wrote and directed such hit films as *All the King's Men* (1949), *Mambo* (1954), *Alexander the Great* (1956), *They Came to Cordura* (1959) and *Lilith* (1964).

Paul Newman is most famous for his steely blue eyes and handsome looks. Although his first film was a dud, *Somebody Up There Likes Me* (1956) brought him back to the spotlight. He also appeared, in his early career, in *The Prize* (1963), *Hud* (1963), *Cool Hand Luke* (1967), *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (1969), *The Color of Money* (1986) and *Message in a Bottle* (1999). He has also recently appeared in the popular HBO film drama *Empire Falls* (2005) along with his wife Joanne Woodward and an ensemble cast.

George C. Scott is Bert Gordon. Scott was a much-loved actor who appeared in many films such as *Anatomy of a Murder* (1959), *The List of Adrian Messenger* (1963), *Dr. Strangelove: or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* (1964), and *Patton* (1970).

*The Hustler* was praised by both critics and moviegoers. The film was nominated for seven awards: Best Actor in a Leading Role for Paul Newman; Best Actor in a Supporting Role for George C. Scott, who refused to even be nominated; Best Actor in a Supporting Role for Jackie Gleason; Best Actress in a Leading Role for Piper Laurie; Best Director for Robert Rossen; Best Picture for Robert Rossen; and Best Writing, Screenplay Based on Material from Another Medium for Sidney Carroll and Robert Rossen. It actually won two Oscars: Best Art Direction-Set Decoration, Black-and-White for Harry Horner and Gene Callahan and Best Cinematography, Black-and-White for Eugen Sch'fftan.



## Summary and Analysis

*The Hustler* begins as Eddie Felson and his partner, Charlie Burns, pull up to a service station. They go inside a bar to pass the time. Viewers learn that Eddie is the best pool player in the area. While in the bar, Eddie plays a guy who begins losing to him quickly. Eddie makes a good shot, and the man wants him to set up the balls as before so he can have a second chance at the bet. Eddie guarantees that he'll make the shot for a second time. Eddie doesn't make the shot the second time, and Charlie won't let him play again. Another man agrees to let him make the shot again and sets up the table. Eddie makes the shot and heads out to the car with a bundle of money.

The next morning, a man walks into a billiards parlor and greets some of the workers. Eddie and Charlie follow him inside to take care of business. Eddie and Charlie get ready to play, and Eddie talks about trying to make \$10,000 in a night since he believes that no one can beat him.

A man walks up to talk to Eddie and begins to talk to him about playing a game with Minnesota Fats. The man tells him that Minnesota Fats hasn't been beaten in fifteen years and is the best in the country. Eddie has come here specifically to play Minnesota Fats. Eddie refuses to leave and is told that at 8:00 that night Minnesota Fats will likely come find him.

Later in the evening, a well-dressed man comes in and begins trying to hustle Eddie. He realizes that this is Minnesota Fats and tries to butter up the famous player. Minnesota Fats realizes that Eddie is a hustler too, and they decide to shoot a game of straight pool. Everyone gathers around to watch the big game as the two men bet \$200 per game.

As the players call the shots and play their games, Eddie sees his money quickly disappearing from his hands. Charlie tries to get him to stop playing because Minnesota Fats is simply too good. Eddie feels that he can still take Minnesota Fats and won't give up until he tries.

Then, Eddie finally starts to win a little. He finally gets ahead about \$1,000, and Eddie suggests that they shoot a game for \$1,000. The men both send their partners down to get them drinks. Downstairs, Minnesota Fats' helper tells a man, who is sitting at a poker table in a back room, about the game. The man cashes in and comes upstairs to watch. Finally, Eddie asks the man to move from behind him, and the man introduces himself as Bert Gordon.

Minnesota pays up for another game and takes a break. With \$11,000 in cash, Eddie asks for breakfast. He refuses to leave until Minnesota Fats says the game is over, and Minnesota Fats refuses to admit he's been beaten. Bert advises Minnesota Fats to stay with Eddie because Eddie is a loser, pure and simple.



Eddie is completely drunk at this point, but he refuses to give up. He has spent hours winning but drinks himself out of the game in the end. Although he could be the best player in the country, he keeps himself from succeeding. After twenty-five hours, Eddie is still playing pool. He is becoming exhausted and wants another drink. They are now up \$18,000, but Eddie still doesn't want to stop. Eddie wants to bet all his money now, but Charlie disagrees. Finally, Charlie is forced to give Eddie the cash.

Eddie is exhausted, and he has almost run through all his money. After winning his money back, Minnesota Fats decides that the game is finally over. At the hotel, Eddie and Charlie try to get some rest at last, and Eddie apologizes to Charlie.

The next morning, Eddie goes to the bus station. He stops to have a bite to eat before leaving and meets a beautiful woman. She has been there for several hours and tries to ignore him as much as possible. He buys her some coffee and points out that they wouldn't have much time together. She buys his breakfast, but he doesn't know it until she leaves.

Later, Eddie and the woman end up in the same spot again. He buys her another drink. They both spend time at the bus station without waiting for a bus. They just want to meet people. She is in college so that she has something to do. He offers to take her home, and she agrees. When they get to her door, she wants to know why he's chosen her. In answer, he kisses her passionately. She pulls away, and he leaves her.

Eddie finds a place to stay and then returns to his locker at the bus station for his suitcase. He sees a man cleaning the floors, watches for a moment and leaves. He also stops to buy a drink to take home with him. That night, he shows up at the pool hall again. Some men recognize him, and they don't want to play him. Finally, they do agree to play him.

When Eddie has breakfast the next day, the woman, Sarah Packard, comes in to see him. They leave together and return to her place. After a passionate morning, they watch the activity on the street out the window. She tells him to shave before he leaves. Since they both have troubles, she wants them to leave each other alone, but he wants to bring his things over later.

Sarah gets groceries later while Eddie waits on her. She was at school all day, and he's been worried. She's excited to have Eddie in her life, but she wants to know where he goes when he goes out. Eddie tells Sarah that he wants her to get help for her drinking problem, but she thinks that he's more than enough help. Then, she starts asking about the case for his pool cue. Jokingly, he tells her it's a machine gun. When he asks her about her money, she tells him it comes from a rich old man who used to be her lover.

A moment later, there's a knock at the door, and Charlie shows up looking for Eddie. Charlie admits that he's broke, and they sit down for drinks. He's mad that Eddie walked out on him. Charlie wants Eddie to come back on the road, but he knows that Eddie wants to go back and meet Minnesota Fats again. Eddie wants to know how much Charlie has, but Charlie doesn't want to give up the money for Eddie to play Minnesota



Fats. Eddie and Charlie get into a big fight and dissolve their partnership. Then, Eddie realizes that he has to find something else or someone else, because he's now alone in the world.

That evening, Sarah types up a story while Eddie cleans the kitchen. She is really drunk, and he tries to take care of her. Eddie takes a look at her story, but she's actually writing something about a contract of depravity. He gets mad, but she says that they're just strangers who drink and make love. She can't figure out what will happen when the money and the drink run out. He slaps her, and she calls him a bum.

After the fight, Eddie returns to the poolroom looking for Minnesota Fats. He decides to join a poker game instead. After losing twenty bucks, Eddie goes outside and runs into Bert Gordon, who buys him a drink. Bert thinks that Eddie is the best pool player around but doesn't have the character to pull it off. Eddie doesn't have the money to play, but Bert thinks he needs more money than he expects. Bert made a lot of money off Eddie the other night and tells Eddie that he believes Eddie is a born loser.

Minnesota Fats was hooked for the first time ever, and Eddie let him loose because he got drunk in order to have an excuse to lose. Bert wants to help Eddie and take a cut of the winnings. Bert is already rich, but he needs something to do. He also warns Eddie that people know about him now.

Instead of working with Bert, Eddie goes out to the local bar and tries to play some of the local guys. Eddie wins and takes the money from the guy. They realize that he's a pool shark and much better than the local kid. The men in the bar surround him and point to his money. As he tries to walk away, they grab him. They give him his money and toss him out, but before they let him go, they break his thumb.

Finally, Eddie makes it home, and Sarah lets him in. Eddie cries and tells her that they broke his thumb. He lies in bed while she tries to comfort him. After he drops his coffee the next morning, he begins to stomp around the apartment. She tries to get him to go out for a while, but all he really wants to do is play pool. She embraces him and tells him that everything will be okay.

Later that day, Eddie and Sarah go out for a picnic together. He asks her if she thinks he's a loser like Bert does. Bert is a winner in Eddie's book, and Eddie is bothered by what he said. Eddie believes that pool can be great as long as he knows where he's going. He knows how to play the game, and he's passionate about it.

Sarah's never felt that way about anything, until Eddie, and then she professes her love. Eddie believes she'll settle down someday and write a book about him. Then, she says she loves him again. He asks if she needs the words. She says yes, but she wants them when he won't take them back. Eddie sits quietly for a while, but he cannot reciprocate the same feelings for her. He simply cannot bring himself to say the words. Instead, he kisses her passionately, and they enjoy a wonderful end to their picnic.

Eddie finally gets the cast off his arm after a couple of weeks, and he goes to show Sarah. Then, he goes to the pool hall to practice. Bert is there and asks about the injury.



Bert already knows the story and offers Eddie an option to work. Eddie has changed now, and he wants to become a great player.

Eddie takes Sarah out for dinner and dancing at a nice restaurant later that night. Sarah realizes that Eddie wants to tell her something, and he lets her know that he'll be leaving the house for a little while. She doesn't believe he'll be back, so she leaves the restaurant and walks out into the pouring rain.

When Eddie and Sarah return home, he tells her his plans. She doesn't believe he'll be back. She believes that she made him up like everything else, and she tells him the truth about her life. Her father sends her a check each month, and she tries to ignore all the bad things in life. For once, she really wanted something, Eddie, to be real, and now she's scared that he's not.

Since Sarah doesn't trust that he'll return, he takes her with him. Eddie, Sarah and Bert are on their way to Louisville during Derby Week, since there's a lot of money going around down there. One of the best, Findley, is there, and he likes to throw around his money. Bert believes that Eddie can win.

At the hotel, Bert tries to get both the suites that he claims to have called and arranged for. Since he didn't actually call for them, he tips the concierge. Sarah doesn't seem very excited about the trip, but Eddie is thrilled to be hustling again. He even runs into one of his friends downstairs and starts up a conversation about the old days.

Sarah goes upstairs alone until Bert comes through the adjoining door. She doesn't understand why Bert and Eddie are so focused on fame and money, and she doesn't trust Bert at all. He feels that she's scared because she could lose Eddie to his fame. He offers to make it up to her later in any way she wants. Then, she quickly closes the adjoining door.

At the Derby, Eddie enjoys betting on the race. He and Sarah have a grand time. Bert comes back and says that Findley has arrived. A moment later, Findley comes over to see them. Findley is interested in Eddie, and they begin trying to hustle one another. After Eddie begins making a proposition, Findley invites him out to his house that night for a game. They all agree, and Sarah decides to stay at the hotel. They try to change her mind and eventually succeed.

At Findley's party that night, Sarah gets very drunk and finds Bert after she gets back from upstairs. He sees her and then goes to talk to her. He says something to her, and she breaks her glass. She breaks down crying, and when Eddie comes over, she tries to attack him. Later, another woman comes upstairs to get her coat and has to move Sarah, who has passed out on the bed. Sarah seems to be completely tired of being with Eddie and has thrown herself down on the bed to wait out the night. She still loves him, but she realizes that, at least for now, she will always come in second to Bert and pool.

When Findley is done partying, the men all go downstairs to play pool. Findley isn't ready to play yet and wants to play at \$100 per game. Findley feels that he might be



being hustled, but they reassure him. Findley asks to up the stakes, and Bert agrees after Eddie reassures him that he will win.

After Eddie loses again and they're out \$2,000, Bert decides they're going to leave because he thinks Eddie's still a loser. Eddie decides to play with his own money and runs up to the room to find it. He doesn't even stop to talk to Sarah, who is lying on the bed.

Back downstairs, Eddie is ready to play. Sarah then comes downstairs to see them play. Bert doesn't want to give more money, but Eddie wants more. Sarah tells Eddie that they need to leave. She reminds him that everyone else is wearing a mask and wants to break them. She doesn't want him to become like the others. He tells her to get off his back.

Bert finally agrees to let Eddie play Findley for \$1,000 a game. Later, Findley asks if Bert is willing to take a check, but he wants cash for the \$12,000 that Eddie just won. Then Bert gives Eddie his share. The cab arrives, but Eddie decides to walk back to the hotel. Bert offers to tell Sarah he's leaving, but Eddie doesn't admit to having made that decision.

Back at the hotel, Bert pours a drink and goes next door to see Sarah. She says that she's leaving in a little while, since that's what he wants. He tells her that Eddie wants her to leave and offered to give her some money. Sarah says that Bert wants to win everything. He picks her up, kisses her and then walks back into his suite. Sarah follows him and asks for a drink. When she goes into the bathroom later, she is mostly undressed, and she writes on the mirror in lipstick: "Converted, twisted, crippled."

Eddie then comes into the hotel and asks for the key to his room. Upstairs, he finds the door open and Bert talking to the police. They are taking pictures of Sarah, who is dead in the bathroom. Bert says she just went in and closed the door for a few minutes, and then he found her. Eddie goes in the bathroom as Bert tells his story. Eddie becomes angry and attacks Bert, but the police pull him off.

Back at the pool hall after Eddie and Bert return from the Derby, Eddie goes in looking for Bert. They stare at each other until Eddie goes over to Minnesota Fats and proposes a game. Fats looks at Bert and then agrees to \$3,000 a game. Bert takes a seat to watch the game. During the game, Eddie announces that he now has character after seeing Sarah dead in the hotel room.

By the end of the night, Fats has lost thousands of dollars and still can't beat Eddie. He tells Bert that he has himself a pool player. Bert tells Eddie that he owes him money, at least half, but Eddie asks what will happen if he doesn't pay. Bert threatens to break Eddie's thumbs and fingers. Fats tells Eddie to go ahead and pay rather than let Bert and the others hurt him.

Eddie realizes that Bert still thinks he's his manager. Eddie is sad about Sarah's death. He feels that they, he and Bert, put the knife in her and twisted it. He loved her, and he traded her for a pool game. Eddie believes that the price is too high, and if he takes the





job with Bert, then Sarah's life was worth nothing. Eddie tells Bert to go ahead and kill him because otherwise he'll come back and kill Bert.

Before Eddie walks out, Bert tells him not to walk in the pool hall again. Then Eddie and Fats compliment one another on their pool games, and Eddie leaves for good.



# Characters

## Eddie Felson, played by Paul Newman

### Description

Eddie Felson is a cocky pool shark. He has been winning money around the country and believes that he is the best. Now, he simply wants to play Minnesota Fats who has long been considered better than him. When Eddie plays Minnesota Fats, his life gets turned upside down. Eddie loses terribly and leaves his partner, Charlie. Eventually he moves in with Sarah Packard, a beautiful young woman who is moody but believes in him. While Eddie is playing that night, Bert Gordon also notices Eddie and wants to make him into a real player.

Eddie finally agrees to begin working with Bert when he runs out of money. Bert wants to make Eddie the best player possible, and he pushes Sarah to the edge. After she commits suicide, Eddie is distraught. He finally goes back and plays Minnesota Fats until he wins all the money he can. Then, he quits the job.

### Analysis

Eddie is a young cocky man who still believes that he can single-handedly rule the world. He is a brilliant pool player, but he has no self-control. When he plays Fats or any other exceptional player, he loses. Until he grows up, Eddie will never be the successful pool shark that he could be.

Eddie cannot seem to get past himself. He is selfish and believes that he is the most important person in the world. Through his relationship with Sarah, he finally begins to realize that there are other people out there. In the end, he is a changed man, but he has to lose something he loves first.

Eddie is a troubled man. He cares for Sara but often has difficulty showing how he feels for her. When he finally begins to make money, Bert pushes Sarah to the edge, and Sarah commits suicide. Her death tears Eddie to pieces, and he decides that he has to finally beat Fats. He succeeds, but Bert and the rest of the mob force him to retire for good or risk death.

## Minnesota Fats, played by Jackie Gleason

### Description

Minnesota Fats is a professional pool shark who is funded by Bert. Older and wiser, Fats is easily able to beat Eddie. When Eddie finally returns, Minnesota Fats is shocked when he gets beat, and he suggests to Eddie that he should go along with Bert.



## **Analysis**

Minnesota Fats is a smart, older man who has spent years working as a professional pool shark. He is widely considered the best in the country but is finally beat by Eddie after Sarah's death.

## **Sarah Packard, played by Piper Laurie**

### **Description**

Sarah Packard is a beautiful but troubled woman who falls in love with Eddie. They meet at a bus stop, where she spends time eating breakfast and reading books. Later they meet again, and Eddie moves in. Sarah is an unusual young woman who takes classes just for fun and makes her money through a mysterious job. She feels very strongly for Eddie but doesn't believe that he feels the same way about her.

When Bert comes into the picture, he convinces Sarah that she is hurting Eddie. She also begins to feel that she is coming in second to pool. She commits suicide, and this helps finally bring Eddie to his senses.

### **Analysis**

Sarah is a moody, troubled young woman. She has jumped from man to man for years, and she is happy to meet Eddie. Sarah takes classes at the college simply for the fun of it. She is looking for something to give fulfillment to her life, and her relationship with Eddie, although not all she hoped, gives her love.

Sarah realizes after fooling around with Bert that she is just going to end up hurting Eddie. She also believes that he will hurt her as he becomes more obsessed with pool. She finally commits suicide to put her troubles to rest, permanently.

## **Bert Gordon, played by George C. Scott**

### **Description**

Bert Gordon is an intelligent, hard working gangster. He first helped Minnesota Fats and began financing his games so that Fats would always win big. When Bert meets Eddie, he is impressed but at first can't convince Eddie to work for him. Eventually Bert convinces Eddie to play for him and takes Eddie and Sarah to the Kentucky Derby. While Eddie is finishing up a game with a rich man, Bert has a short affair with Sarah. He tells her that she's no good for Eddie and that she'll be forgotten quickly. This helps push her to suicide.



When Eddie returns, he realizes what Bert has done. Although Bert tries to convince Eddie to get over it, Eddie leaves. Later he comes back and beats Minnesota Fats before Bert and the rest of the mob forces him to retire for good.

### **Analysis**

Bert is a scheming man only looking to make a quick buck off someone else. He feels that by financing and training Eddie, he is doing Eddie a favor. Although Eddie doesn't agree, Bert finally convinces him to go along with the plan, at least for awhile.

Bert doesn't care what happens to others as long as it helps him. He seems to have no feelings when he pushes Sarah over the edge. In the end, Bert loses Eddie, but he does make sure that Eddie is out of the game for good.

## **Charlie Burns, played by Myron McCormick**

### **Description**

Charlie is Eddie's first partner. He tries to convince Eddie not to bet foolishly when playing Minnesota Fats, but Eddie refuses to listen. After a terrible night, Eddie sneaks out. Charlie finally finds Eddie, but they dissolve their partnership for good.

### **Analysis**

Charlie has more sense than Eddie. Although he doesn't take such big risks, he plays it safe enough that they could continue playing for a long time. Charlie loses all his income when Eddie leaves him.

## **Findley, played by Murray Hamilton**

### **Description**

Findley is a rich man who Eddie plays when they go to the Kentucky Derby. Although he's not a good player, Findley likes to throw around his money for some fun. During a huge party he throws, he loses several thousand dollars to Eddie.

### **Analysis**

Findley isn't stupid as much as he is wasteful. He's smart enough to know that he's likely to get beat, but he enjoys the game.



# Themes

## Desire for Money

Eddie Felson has one focus in his life - making money by playing pool. He cares for nothing but money and fame. Eddie knows that he is a good pool player, and he expects to make his fortune playing pool.

When viewers first meet Eddie, he shows his true colors while playing Minnesota Fats. Although he wins most of the night, Eddie becomes so drunk that he ends up losing to Fats. Eddie wants to make thousands of dollars quickly, but he often defeats himself.

After Eddie begins working with Bert, he learns more and more about winning successfully. Eddie makes thousands in one night at the Derby and wins even more from the last game with Fats. Eddie wants money more than almost anything, but when he loses Sarah, he realizes that some things are more important.

## The Born Loser

Eddie always seems to be defeating himself. He tries to win at pool, but when he is up against a real player like Minnesota Fats, he seems to fall short. After Bert watches him play, he tells Eddie that he is a born loser.

Some people seem to thwart all their best efforts with their own attitudes. Eddie may come close to winning thousands of dollars, but he always becomes drunk so that he has an excuse to end up the loser. Eddie's pessimism and unfounded cockiness defeats him more often than anything else.

At the end of the film, Eddie finally proves to himself and everyone else that he is not a born loser. He plays Minnesota Fats on his own terms and wins big. Eddie can finally believe in himself with honesty and commitment.

## Love of a Woman

Eddie has spent his life being a womanizer and a hustler. He moves from town to town, never really worrying about settling down with one woman. After being defeated by Minnesota Fats, Eddie meets Sarah, and then he moves in with her.

Eddie finds that Sarah's love is the most important thing in his life, but he finds out too late. Over the weeks, Eddie becomes attached to Sarah. Even though she has some major problems and drinks far too much, Eddie falls in love with her.

After Bert pushes Sarah to the edge, Eddie returns to find her dead. At that point, he truly realizes the importance of her love. He gets his revenge by winning thousands of dollars from Bert and Minnesota Fats before they force him into retirement.

## Style and Cinematography

*The Hustler* is a brilliant film. Paul Newman creates the character of Eddie as a restless, hunted young man who can't seem to find his way to success. Rather than giving up, though, Eddie always tries to go on and make it on his own.

Although the studio certainly didn't have to film in black and white, that choice makes all the difference. The drama, pain and actions in the film all seem more poignant because of the way it is filmed. As hope becomes bleaker, the scenes become darker. When Sarah takes a look at herself in the mirror before committing suicide, the light becomes extremely bright. These stylistic moves tune the audience in to the emotions and events that are happening.

By using some of the best actors in the industry, Robert Rossen is able to create a first-class film. Paul Newman, George C. Scott and Piper Laurie create a primary cast that is classic. They bring the characters to life so that even the most ordinary American could understand and relate to the events and emotions of the characters.



# Motifs

## Pool Games

Eddie's life revolves around pool games. Viewers first meet him when he goes to play Minnesota Fats, who is widely known as the best pool player in the country. He is Eddie's only real competition, and Eddie is cocky enough to believe that he can easily beat Fats. He almost does before drinking himself out of the game.

The audience sees Eddie's progress as a person through the way he plays pool at different times. At the beginning, he's a young cocky man with no motivation and no real commitment. Later in the film, he grows up and becomes an excellent player who truly believes in himself.

In Eddie's final pool game, he plays Minnesota Fats again, and after almost an entire day of playing, Fats gets out of the game. The gangsters there force Eddie into retirement, but during that game, we see that Eddie has finally grown up. Sarah's death has forced him to look at himself, and he decides to finally be a true man.

## Hustling

Eddie has spent a lifetime making his fortune hustling. When he meets Minnesota Fats, though, he finally understands what it's like to get hustled. After he and Charlie run through all their money, Eddie runs away from his problems and goes to live with Sarah at her apartment.

After a while, Eddie becomes tired of relying on Sarah for everything. He wants to be his own person, but he has no money with which to work. Thus, he goes back to small time hustling at a bar and has his thumb broken by the owner and the owner's friends. Eddie has come to an all-time low.

Finally, Eddie meets Bert and is turned into a big time hustler. Bert takes Eddie and Sarah to the Kentucky Derby to hustle an extremely rich man. Eddie easily wins thousands of dollars and is thrilled with his take. However, that night Sarah commits suicide, and everything changes.

In the final scene of the film, Eddie takes hustling into his own hands. He refuses to work for Bert or anyone else and insists on doing things his own way. Eddie respects himself and successfully wins the games that night, although by doing so he is forced to retire permanently.





## Sarah's Drunken Speeches

Sarah meets Eddie at a bus station one morning. After running into each other again, Eddie moves in with her. Sarah gives many drunken speeches throughout the course of their relationship, and these speeches help viewers understand where both Eddie and Sarah stand in terms of their lives and their relationships.

During some of these speeches, Sarah talks about her life and life in general. She discusses with Eddie all the difficulties of living and reveals that sometimes she just wants it all to be over. These types of statements help us recognize her suicidal tendencies so that the outcome is, on some level, expected.

Sarah also talks about her relationship with Eddie. She loves him, and he loves pool. Although she's been with many men, he is really the one who has captured her interest. She realizes, though, that she can never compete with pool for Eddie's love; in many ways, he is already taken.



# Symbols

## Pool Table

Eddie Felson has been a hustler all his young life. He travels all over the country to different pool halls and hustles young men there. Only one man is better than him - Minnesota Fats - and Eddie plans to beat him as well.

The pool table is symbolic of Eddie's way of life. He lives around the table, eating, drinking and playing all day and all night. Eddie has never known a different way, and he enjoys making easy money. As viewers see Eddie around the table, we also see him change and grow up.

Eddie finds truth around the table as well. He realizes after talking with Bert that he is his own biggest enemy. Eddie doesn't feel like he deserves to win against Minnesota Fats, so he gets drunk for an excuse to lose. In the end, Eddie comes back and plays Fats like a man. He stands around the same pool table a different man, one who has experienced pain and has come to terms with his life.

## Broken Thumb

When Eddie is living with Sarah, he begins to feel like a kept man. She pays for everything and takes care of him while he contributes nothing. After getting bored one day, he goes out and tries to hustle at a small town pool hall. Although he wins, the men become angry and break his thumb.

The broken thumb is symbolic of Eddie's broken life. At this point, he has reached his lowest spot by going out to hustle younger men who aren't professionals. He is desperate for money and change and almost loses his career because of it.

From that point on, Eddie's life begins to change. He sees Bert again and decides to work with him to make it as a big time hustler. Eddie becomes obsessed with the game, though, and forgets the one person he cares about the most.

After Sarah dies, Eddie falls apart again for a time but comes back a changed man. From the broken man with the broken thumb, Eddie emerges as a smart, savvy adult who can hold his own under the greatest pressure.

## Sarah's Death

Sarah's death serves to bring Eddie new life. Sarah has always had troubles, and she consistently focuses on the negative aspects of her life. She drinks constantly and is always worried that Eddie will leave her. When he seems to love pool more than her, she is pushed to the edge by Bert and commits suicide.



From the ashes of Sarah's death, Eddie, however, emerges as a new person. Formerly a born loser and lazy bum, Eddie begins to gain a sense of self. He is devastated by her death, and that pain helps him get his priorities in order. He plays Fats one last time to prove that he can win before being forced out by Bert.

Sarah's death is symbolic of her pain. She always seems to come in second in everyone's life - her father's and Eddie's. Her death also symbolizes Eddie's growth, as it takes this tragedy for him to come to his senses.



## Essay Questions

What is Eddie's profession? Why does this profession suit him?

Who is Charlie? What role does he play in Eddie's life and in the structure of the film?

Why does Eddie lose to Minnesota Fats?

How does Eddie meet Sarah? How is the manner of their meeting significant?

Describe the relationship between Eddie and Sarah.

Why do some men break Eddie's thumb?

How does Bert convince Eddie to work with him?

Where do Bert and Eddie go to make some money, and why is their chosen destination?

What happens to Sarah while on the trip?

How does Eddie finish his business with Bert and Fats? Why will he never play pool again?