

In America Study Guide

In America by Susan Sontag

(c)2015 BookRags, Inc. All rights reserved.



Contents

In America Study Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Plot Summary.....	3
Chapter 0.....	5
Chapter 1.....	6
Chapter 2.....	7
Chapter 3.....	8
Chapter 4.....	9
Chapter 5.....	10
Chapter 6.....	11
Chapter 7.....	13
Chapter 8.....	14
Chapter 9.....	16
Characters.....	17
Objects/Places.....	20
Themes.....	22
Style.....	24
Quotes.....	27
Topics for Discussion.....	29



Plot Summary

A group of artistic and intellectual Poles, searching for a better life, unsuccessfully attempt to form a utopian community in the Tatra Mountains of southern Poland. Undaunted, they pursue their dream to America and to Southern California, where they form a commune. Everyone is changed by the experience - some get stronger while others collapse and return to Poland. Although their commune ultimately fails because of financial mismanagement, the immigrants who remain go their separate ways toward becoming full-fledged Americans. Maryna Zalezowski, a famous Polish actress and the main character, quits her acting career to start the commune then resumes acting when the commune fails, becoming an internationally famous actress.

Thirty-five-year-old actress Maryna Zalezowski, restless and in search of adventure, leads a retinue of Poles to the United States in 1876 to form an idealistic commune near Anaheim, California. In the group are her husband, Bogdan Dembowski (a count without a counting house), seven-year-old son Piotr, a writer named Ryszard who is enamored of the actress, and others looking to start a new life in a new country. They depart from Poland in waves, with Ryszard and Julian, a family friend, leaving first to check out a community in California where the group imagines a life of freedom that combines shared financial responsibility with artistic expression and development. The group seems to believe a utopian society will be easy to create in California, even though their efforts to do just that in Europe have failed.

Their painful farewells to family, friends, and countrymen are a small preparation for the arduous journey with passengers separated into first class for those who could afford the fare and steerage (the below-deck steamship passage were reserved for the destitute and deranged). The party finally lands in New York at the time of the Centennial Exhibition, where they get a concentrated dose of what makes America exciting - new inventions such as the telephone that cause amazement and a fear for Maryna that the device may destroy the theater because of the ease with which audiences could listen remotely to performances.

Enraptured by advertising slogans that promote the ease and abundance of life in California, Ryszard and Julian board a high-speed train for the West Coast. As the company that includes Maryna sets forth on their American odyssey, they are torn between the excitement and challenge of the New World and a tender longing for the lives they abandoned in Poland. Having prepared herself to give up her acting career to move to America, Maryna is pleasantly surprised to find an active and vigorous thespian life in her adopted land. In a letter to a friend in Poland, Maryna describes some of the cultural riches she discovers in New York and admits that she has stashed several of the stage costumes in her shipping trunk. She also encounters the famed Booth family of actors that includes John Wilkes Booth, the assassin of President Lincoln.

Maryna gets her first exposure to American theater in San Francisco where she sees the famous Shakespearean actor Edwin Booth in two productions at the California Theatre. Once she joins the group at the commune outside the mostly German



Anaheim, she discovers an inherent inequity in workload distribution: the men do only those tasks they cannot postpone, while the women take care of the daily meal preparation and feeding the animals. Soon after Piotr meets American children, he wants to change his name to Peter, and Ryszard wants to change his name to Richard. The commune has invested heavily in wine grapes and suffers severely because of a drop in market prices for their crop. They ignore the advice of a savvy Jewish businessman in Anaheim that the only way they can succeed is to also make and sell wines.

In his diary, Maryna's husband writes: "We live worse than we did in Poland. If our community fails, it won't be because of the impracticality of all utopian schemes but because we have renounced too much of what was gratifying". One member of the commune, Wanda Solski, attempts suicide. Another couple decides to return to Poland, yet another member takes off for New York. Maryna leaves her husband Bogdan and son Peter at the commune and goes to San Francisco to find work in the theater. For the first time, she experiences the rush of freedom that she expected to feel upon coming to America.

Maryna stays with a Polish immigrant couple in San Francisco and becomes an instant celebrity because of her fame as an actress in the old country. To help her to overcome the English barrier to an American stage career, Maryna hires a speech tutor named Mildred Collingridge who gives elocution lessons to Nob Hill matrons. Ryszard/Richard comes to visit Maryna in San Francisco and they have a brief but passionate affair - at the same time that Maryna finds a mutual sexual interest in Ms. Collingridge. The attraction leads only to repression.

Maryna changes her name to Marina Zalenska, and is billed by her manager/promoter over her tepid protests as a Polish countess because of her husband's title. Her career quickly catches fire, and she soon is touring the country in her own private, opulent railroad car and is giving performances at theaters in cities large and small. As Marina advances in her American theatrical career, she leaves more and more of her old life behind and becomes more narcissistic.

There is an estrangement between her and her husband and son. However, when Marina is called to perform with Edwin Booth in New York, they go on tour together. It is apparent that Marina's absorption in her career has become self-absorption of the sort that is totally American. The story ends with a drunken, self-absorbed monologue by the actor Edwin Booth, to which Maryna is witness. Her dramatic and artistic hero has become a snarling, vicious apotheosis of the American ideal of self-realization and fulfillment.



Chapter 0

Chapter 0 Summary

A group of artistic and intellectual Poles, searching for a better life, unsuccessfully attempt to form a utopian community in the Tatra Mountains of Southern Poland. Undaunted, they pursue their dream to America and to Southern California, where they form a commune. Everyone is changed by the experience - some get stronger while others collapse and return to Poland. Although their commune ultimately fails because of financial mismanagement, the immigrants who remain go their separate ways toward becoming full-fledged Americans. Maryna Zalezowski, a famous Polish actress and the main character, quits her acting career to start the commune then resumes acting when the commune fails, becoming an internationally famous actress.

Instead of designating the lead into the story as "Introduction" or "Preface", one confronts the somewhat unusual title of Chapter 0 (Zero). This is emblematic of a number of stylistic idiosyncrasies throughout the novel - such as sentence fragments without verb forms - which the reader must puzzle over. In this chapter, or non-chapter, the narrator presents herself as an interloper at a social gathering where most of the characters in the novel appear. The narrator/author speaks directly to the reader to explain how she arrived at an understanding of her characters, their names, and behavior patterns. The reader is introduced to Maryna the actress and her husband Bogdan while the narrator speculates that they probably do not share a bedroom. The reader is also introduced to the writer Ryszard who harbors a passion for Maryna, and to others in their artistic and social milieu in Poland.

Chapter 0 Analysis

Despite its unconventional structure and nomenclature, this chapter effectively portrays the very Old World society from where the Poles who are to immigrate to America sprang. One is drawn rather viscerally into this circle by the device of the narrator entering a gay social gathering from an icy winter night, to be warmed by the company as well as by a huge wood stove. The reader learns of Maryna Zalezowski's star status in her native country, and her circle of admirers who treat her like royalty. The fact that her husband, Bogdan, bears the vestigial title of count tends to emphasize the tragic history of Poland and its longstanding status as an oppressed nation in Europe. However, the vitality of the gathering makes it seem quite believable that this restless group of artists would seek a new frontier in America.



Chapter 1

Chapter 1 Summary

The character of Maryna is visualized from a variety of perspectives - her current and former husband, the writer Ryszard, her stage dresser Zofia, her half-brother Stefan's physician Henryk, and others. Maryna relates to Ryszard that she decided to become an actress at the age of seven so she could see Stephan acting on the stage. She also tells of her marriage at 16 to a man 27 years her senior - a German who had adopted the Polish surname of Zalezowski and with whom she had a daughter who died shortly after birth.

Despite their difference in ages, her husband fostered both her acting career and that of her half-brother, Stefan. Maryna tells of her unending struggle to secure a measure of recognition that drives her to tackle newer plays in addition to her already beloved Shakespeare, Schiller and Slowacki. The chapter ends with Maryna's interior monologue in which she acknowledges the help she has received from others, including her first husband Heinrich, and reveals her restlessness and eagerness to make a fresh start.

Chapter 1 Analysis

Maryna's mercurial temperament is revealed in this chapter, as well as the fact she is a thoroughgoing thespian who experiences life through the stage. Her narcissistic personality is also revealed, as well as her pattern of using the men in her life as stage props. One wonders whether she is capable of loving anyone as much as herself or anything as much as the theater. A passage early in the chapter emphasizes this point: "She had loved being an actress because the theatre seemed to her nothing less than the truth. A higher truth. Acting in a play, one of the great plays, you became better than you really were. You said only words that were sculpted, necessary, exalting. You always looked as beautiful as you could be, artifice assisting, at your age".

There is a foreshadowing in this chapter of how easy it is for Maryna to assume another role - that of an avant garde social experimenter - in forming a commune in America as well as the ease with which she later abandons that role and returns to her first passion, which is the theater. There is a parallel between the character of Maryna and Holly Golightly, the rootless party girl in "Breakfast at Tiffany's," who is described this way: "She's a phony, but she's a real phony".



Chapter 2

Chapter 2 Summary

Maryna flees Warsaw with her husband Bogdan and son Piotr to the village of Zakopane in the Tatra Mountains in a quest for health. The artist Jakub Goldberg, actor Tadeusz Bulanda, and the schoolmaster Julian Solski and his wife Wanda accompany her. It is this journey and group of people are the seed of their later emigration to America. They build themselves simple rustic huts to live in, and their time is taken up with the basic routines of daily life - cleaning, chopping wood, collecting fruits and potatoes to eat - with time in the evening for reading Shakespeare aloud. Long a favorite summer destination for these families, none has ever spent a winter there.

The physician Henryk later joins the group as they discover that their summer idyll in the mountains also involves snowstorms and hardships in the winter. Maryna writes to Ryszard in Warsaw, urging him to join them, and he leaves the day after receiving her letter. After barely surviving through the winter, the group makes plans to go to America in the spring. Maryna makes a quick trip to Krakow when her half-brother Stefan falls ill and dies. Maryna accompanies her husband Bogdan to his family's estate in western Poland to say farewell, and there she feels scorned by his aristocratic relatives. In every respect, both Bogdan and Maryna appear ready to strike out for America.

Chapter 2 Analysis

The restlessness that Maryna feels seems to affect first her husband and then a circle of friends and acquaintances that long for a better, healthier life with more opportunities. Their first attempt to achieve this takes them to the beautiful Tatra Mountains that border Czechoslovakia, where the group lives in a communal-style colony that demands major lifestyle adaptations for everyone. Their various plans to create an economic base for themselves gradually evaporate as they struggle to survive the first winter, and the group realizes that what they really want is a complete break with Europe and a fresh start in America. In this experience, there is a foreshadowing of what awaits the group. They say farewell to their families, careers, and friends and determine to make the trip to the New World.



Chapter 3

Chapter 3 Summary

Ryszard and Julian travel to Liverpool, England and board the SS Germanic for their steamship voyage to New York. Bachelor Ryszard asks the married Julian to pretend onboard the ship that they do not know each other, to make it easier for him to meet available young women and to gather material for articles about moving to America he hopes to freelance to magazines. Ryszard fantasizes about winning Maryna away from Bogdan once they reach the New World. Ryszard's curiosity takes him below-deck where he encounters the dark, Dickensian world of steerage where the truly destitute find passage to America.

Below the decks, families are piled together like rats in a cage and Ryszard says he wants to interview some of the passengers for a magazine article. A crewmember introduces him to six young prostitutes, and he picks a 15-year-old girl who is terrified. They have a kind of ersatz sex that satisfies neither and leaves him feeling very sad. Once in New York, Ryszard and Julian pursue their individual interests - whorehouses and slums for Ryszard and scientific curiosities including the Centennial Exposition for Julian. After a week, they leave by train for California, filled with optimism about a land of milk and honey where health and happiness abound.

Chapter 3 Analysis

Alongside their craving for excitement and novelty, the two Polish immigrants demonstrate that they have brought their own form of personal baggage with them from their native land. Ryszard's natural curiosity as a writer draws him into several seamy situations, but Julian maintains his proper European manners while checking out some of the technological novelties of New York. Likewise, the passengers on the SS Germanic in steerage obviously and dramatically bring their own baggage of poverty with them to the New World. This chapter presents a more visceral sense of what it means when different cultures collide with each other as well as a feeling for the excitement that such contact creates for the immigrants. Particularly for Polish immigrants, America represents an unlimited horizon in contrast to their historical suffering at the hands of different war conquerors.



Chapter 4

Chapter 4 Summary

In a series of letters to her friend Henryk in Poland, Maryna describes her journey and adventures in New York with her husband and son while they stay at an inn in Hoboken, N.J. before departing for California. In the first of these, Maryna says she has already begun to change and to leave behind some of the sadness of Poland. Maryna describes an unpleasant encounter with her former husband Heinrich before their ship left Bremerhaven, then tells Henryk she has contemplated jumping into the sea but that she was "upstaged" by another passenger who actually did go overboard and was not found in the darkness. Maryna proclaims her personal feminist doctrine of freedom and independence that the theater permits her, and laments her departure from the stage.

Maryna tells Henryk she has hired a Polish girl, Aniela, as a servant. In a marvelously descriptive letter of her New York adventures, Maryna tells of an exhibit that she and Piotr see at the Centennial Exposition of American Indians who are depicted as sub-humans. She finds it shocking because of the respect shown the Indians by Europeans. Maryna is also entranced by a primitive telephone, and worries that the device could rob actors of their livelihood by making dramas available to the public through an earpiece. Maryna also notes that the group will take a steamship to Panama, then a train across the isthmus, then another ship bound for San Francisco.

Chapter 4 Analysis

Even though Maryna and her entourage have not yet reached their destination, the trip itself already has wrought profound changes. Maryna describes herself as "swimming in vacancy", with hardly the time or energy to think of herself. She tells Henryk her inner life, Poland, and the stage all have "evaporated". It becomes evident how the mere decision to change is itself a change, because the Polish travelers advance toward their new lives as they leave behind their old lives in Europe before even reaching the shores of New York City.

The process is presented and described as a more-or-less inevitable part of the change they have all decided upon - with the possible exception of the servant girl Aniela, who remains fearful and uncertain. The coexistence side-by-side of the lofty ambitions and ideals of the expatriates and the gritty reality of travel come into focus in a South American cafe where they stop for something to eat. As they discuss the existential exigencies of their adventure, a large brown cockroach scrambles across their table, then flies away. The women shriek and the cafe owner laughs.



Chapter 5

Chapter 5 Summary

The Polish settlers begin to make a home for themselves on rented land outside Anaheim, where they plan to grow wine grapes. Their first priorities are to create more living space for the families by constructing a simple adobe cottage for two couples. Exhilarated by the beautiful scenery, the commune members are at once aware of their isolation and loneliness. Their first meal is eggplant roasted over a fire to the accompaniment of a howling coyote. Maryna gets a glimpse of how it is possible to build a new life without the old disappointments, and everyone jumps into the hard work of making their new life succeed.

A circus comes to the nearby orderly German town of Anaheim, and the half-breed strongman Zambo murders the circus manager and abducts an aerialist named Matilda - causing trepidation in the Polish community. Ryszard writes a story about the episode and reads it to the group while wishing he could write a story about his frustrated love for Maryna. A friend from Poland arrives from San Francisco for a visit and asks Maryna whether she misses the stage, to which she answers no.

Chapter 5 Analysis

It is apparent how California begins to affect the Poles who have chosen to live there. Each in their own way begins to claim more of his or her own unique identity, to believe more deeply in unlimited potential and opportunity, and to put aside the confining traditions and worldviews of Europe. Maryna visualizes herself in a journey toward health, which she sees as a promise of more future as compared with possessions that are yokes to the past. Ryszard becomes energized about his writing and a bit more aggressive about expressing his affections for Maryna. The circus episode is symbolic of the unleashing of energies that the settlers experience, albeit being an enactment that is more violent. Within the structure of the commune that the group has defined for itself, the reader sees individuals becoming independent, adventurous and risk-taking, although there is not much evidence in the story of how the members communicate about the business of the commune.



Chapter 6

Chapter 6 Summary

The settlers hire a photographer to capture an image of them after six months in California. The photographer is a fiercely independent young woman from Northern California who travels alone with her camera and supplies, protected only by a Colt pistol. The Old World ymigrs are shocked but delighted by this self-sufficient woman who drinks whiskey in the morning and barks orders to her subjects to get the picture she wants. Maryna finds her courageous and admirable; some of the others doubt her sincerity. They complete a library in the main house and Maryna imports a piano from San Francisco.

Piotr changes his name to Peter, the local German farmers call Bogdan "Bob-Dan", and Ryszard has become Richard. The Polish-Americans note that another idealistic community called Societas Edenica has moved into a 100-acre ranch north of Anaheim, where alcohol, tobacco, and meat are banned. Richard slips Maryna a love letter asking her to go for a ride with him in the hills. In his diary, Bogdan reveals that he is aware of Richard's romantic interest in his wife but reassures himself that Richard could never offer her the stability and fidelity he does.

As the commune's financial prospects dwindle, Bogdan is advised by a Jewish merchant in Anaheim to create their own wine company - or perish. Wanda attempts suicide, and soon thereafter, she and her husband Julian leave to return to Poland. Another couple, Barbara and Aleksander, decide to join Edenica. Maryna decides to return to the stage, and to go to San Francisco in search of her dream.

Chapter 6 Analysis

The ideals fostered by the Polish bohemians and their friends crumble when they are exposed to the harsh reality of adapting to life in America. Everyone is changed by the experience - some for the better, and some for the worse. As Richard points out in a love letter to Maryna, neither of them was cut out to be farmers. The handwriting is on the wall concerning the future of the commune when Danuta and Cyprian decide to become vegetarians and stop having meals with the rest of the group. The bitterness that this relatively innocuous change causes is used to insert another bit of foreshadowing about the fate of the commune. Maryna, too, has reflected more than once about the division of labor in the commune that assigns to women the traditional roles of preparing meals and cleaning while the men "make plans" for their future.

Bogdan, Maryna's husband, also foreshadows the commune's disintegration in a diary entry, in which he admits to a homoerotic longing for the strong, young Mexican youths hired to help the Poles work in their vineyards. What began as the ideal fulfillment of the settler's desires becomes symbolic of the frustration of their real desires for community,



for sexual union, for personal freedom. Abandonment of the commune becomes inevitable as its members change and become more aware of their true identities. In many respects, the demands of operating a farm successfully parallel the hard work individuals must put into their own personal growth - something that is later incorporated into the American belief in the improvement of self. As they develop and grow along purely individual paths, the unity required for survival of the commune is weakened.



Chapter 7

Chapter 7 Summary

After the failure of the commune, Maryna goes to San Francisco to try and resuscitate her stage career, leaving her husband Bogdan behind to close up the commune and search for property for them on the coast. She stays with a retired Polish captain who is married to an American woman. But, finding that she needs solitude, Maryna pawns her jewelry so she can afford to live for a few months alone and work on her craft - and on improving her English with the help of speech teacher Mildred Collingridge. She encounters Ryszard, who had gone ahead of her to San Francisco and waited for her. They go to the theater and for a ferry ride around San Francisco Bay, then at last become lovers.

Maryna signs with an agent, Angus Barton, who secures her an initial one-week engagement in a San Francisco theater. Maryna receives a telegram from her husband informing her he will be delayed getting to San Francisco because of injuries he sustains falling off a horse. Bogdan also tells her of his growing fascination with a company that plans to make flying machines, although no one is quite sure how this is done. Her stage debut is a smashing success, she receives mountains of congratulatory flowers and sends her husband a one-word telegram: "Victory". Maryna acquires Harry Warnock as her manager and embarks on a three-week tour in the gold rush country north of San Francisco.

Chapter 7 Analysis

In this chapter, Maryna's egocentrism and narcissism come into sharp definition as she leaves the commune and restarts her acting career. Having lived her life as a leading lady on the stage, offstage the men and other people in her life are shown as being only supporting roles. She seems to have no compunctions about throwing herself into an affair with the devoted Ryszard, despite the fact that her husband already suspects infidelity and despite her knowledge that the writer is sincere in his affections.

The minor theme of a potential lesbian attraction with her speech coach also serves to underline that Maryna's interest in Ms. Collingridge extends only so far as how Mrs. Collingridge can help the actress get back on her feet. Maryna's resumption of her career is symbolic of the way Americans are said to be constantly reinventing themselves and assuming new roles. In the New World, the winners are those who can pursue their own goals with unwavering self-interest, while the losers are those burdened with sentimental affections. In this sense, the social landscape of America seems perfectly suited to someone with a completely narcissistic personality such as Maryna.



Chapter 8

Chapter 8 Summary

Maryna's successful appearances in San Francisco and on tour lead to engagements in New York City under the name of Countess Marina Zalenska, a name suggested by her new manager, Harry Warnock. But regardless of name, Maryna makes a hit with the New York critics and convinces her manager to drop the fake royalty pretense as she takes her husband Bogdan and son Peter on tour around the country with her. When the company reaches Omaha, Bogdan returns to Southern California to look for a home that the family can live in whenever Maryna is not on tour. During a break, Maryna decides to visit her mother and friends in Poland and sends a note to Henryk with this bit of self-reproach: "I'm a monster, I've thrown love away. I'm a bad mother. I lie to everybody, including myself".

After her trip to Poland, Maryna and her family go to Paris where she spends three weeks acquiring a dozen new wardrobes. Immediately upon their return to America, Maryna begins to audition actors for her own company. She acquires her own private railroad cars for herself and her company, as well as the luggage, and becomes the first American actress to tour the country in this modern manner. Then she takes her company on a mostly-Shakespeare tour of England, where the praise is slower but just as affirmative as in America. Maryna finally is asked to appear with the famous actor Edwin Booth in a benefit performance of *Hamlet* at the Metropolitan Opera in New York. She receives a letter from Henryk with the news that Ryszard has married, and she is first flushed with jealousy then "iced with anger".

While in Lexington, Kentucky on tour, Maryna is visited by an evangelist who protests against the "immorality" of the plays in which Maryna appears. Maryna says people like her will swallow nothing but shallow entertainment and will "ruin America". Although not a foreshadowing of events in the novel, this peculiar scene is certainly a foreshadowing of events that have come to pass in America with the rise of the politicized religious right. It also foreshadows the moralistic streak in the American character that produced not only Prohibition, but also the paranoid anticommunist crusades of the late Senator Joseph McCarthy as well as the anti-abortion, anti-gay movements of today.

Chapter 8 Analysis

The actress finds accommodation both in career, self, and marriage. Although she tells her husband Bogdan that her family comes first in her life, Maryna lives as if her career and herself come first. As she takes her career in America to new heights of critical and popular acclaim, Maryna also realizes how much she really loves Bogdan and probes to see if he still loves her. In a discussion of a play where the frustrated wife leaves husband and children to find personal satisfaction, they challenge each other (by proxy) over their intentions regarding their own marriage. They both reassure each other they



have no desire to leave the marriage. Maryna tells Bogdan she would give up the stage again if it would please him, and he refuses to even consider it.

Although Maryna admits that she sometimes has trouble remembering what she has said onstage and what she has said privately, she acts as if she is preparing herself for the greatest role in her career - herself. As she sits at her dressing room mirror before going onstage, she weeps "because she was so happy - unless a happy life is impossible and the highest a human being can attain is a heroic life. Happiness comes in many forms and to have lived for art is a privilege, a blessing, and women are talented at renouncing sexual felicity". Of all the people who undertook the commune experiment, Maryna seems to be the only one who has unequivocally grown toward greater individual authenticity.



Chapter 9

Chapter 9 Summary

The final chapter is a drunken soliloquy by Edwin Booth, as he and Maryna complete their first production of *The Merchant of Venice*. Booth ruminates about his career and the theatre, his brother John (President Lincoln's assassin), and the American and European theater. Edwin is at times abusive toward Maryna as he ridicules her accent and tells her that Europeans do not have a monopoly on tragedy, or Americans on "callow optimism" according to prevailing stereotypes. He reveals that his brother Johnny was to be the great Booth heir to his father, who encouraged his son Edwin to become a cabinetmaker. Booth speaks lovingly and sadly of his brother, the most talented actor of his family.

From his narrative, it is clear that his father, too, was an erratic drunkard and that his brother long planned the murder of Lincoln. "To kill a king, that's a great deed", his brother said, although Edwin thought him merely posturing like any other actor. "Lord what a corrupting profession we exercise", he tells Maryna. "We think we are upholding the beautiful and true and we are merely propagating vanity and lies". The chapter and book end with Maryna begging him to stop his tirade, whereupon he changes the subject to the business of their craft and how to improve a scene in *Merchant of Venice*.

Chapter 9 Analysis

The reader gets a stark look at the dark underside of acting and the theater in the final chapter, as famed actor Edwin Booth unleashes his caged demons with the aid of alcohol. It is a final irony for Maryna that the struggle and work she has put into her career has brought her to a place at the top of her profession where she sees other actors as damaged and possibly deranged human beings. Her narcissism has made possible the focus on herself and her own interests to the exclusion of a deep love with anyone else, and this has helped her succeed. In the person of Edwin Booth, she sees a mirror of herself in his ability to project convincing dramatic characters on the stage but also in his inability to find any happiness in his own life. Booth ends his tirade with an assertion that he is her "husband in art" and offers an invitation to his bedroom. Maryna has encountered someone as self-involved and as in love with the theater as she is.



Characters

Maryna Zalezowski [Marina Zalenska]

Maryna is a 35-year-old Polish actress when the novel begins, acclaimed as the greatest actress in Poland. With ash-blond hair and a somewhat melodramatic manner, she is a dynamic personality who attracts both men and women. From a poor family, Maryna was married at 16 to a German man almost 40 years her senior. Their child died in infancy and Maryna remarried a nominal Polish count, Bogdan Dembowski. Their only child Piotr is seven years old at the start of the novel. Maryna is naturally gifted with a strong empathic ability that she uses to "become" the characters she portrays, and occasionally employs in her relations with her husband and other significant people in her life.

Her natural restlessness and need to explore lead her to entertain the notion of going to America, and when she finally makes the decision, she becomes the unofficial leader of the group that ultimately makes the trip. Maryna is a paradox because she seems to genuinely love her husband and child, but they are secondary to her own dramatic passions and love for the theater. In this novel, her love for the theater symbolizes many things - Maryna's narcissism, her need to constantly try out new characters and new experiences, and her own inability to be honest in relationships which she herself expresses several times.

Maryna gives up her acting career in Poland to make the transition to an idealistic planned self-sustaining commune in California, but then decides to reinvigorate her career when the commune falters. This can be read as a commentary on the durability and survivability of those who can adapt and change, whether on the stage or in real life. Skilled at changing roles, Maryna makes a smash hit as an American actress, which also means the further marginalization of her family. As she reaches the pinnacle of her art, the reader gets a glimpse of the loneliness and futility that await her.

Ryszard [Richard]

A 25-year-old writer when the story starts, Ryszard is wildly in love with Maryna and is part of the group of bohemian friends and admirers who follow her about in Poland and eventually go with Maryna, Bogdan, and their son to start a commune in California. Energetic, idealistic, and artistic like Maryna; Ryszard mirrors the more reckless aspects of her personality. Somewhat of a sexual adventurer, Ryszard consorts with a child prostitute on the steamboat to America and with prostitutes in New York, while pursuing Maryna from Poland to California.

He finally beds her in San Francisco while her husband is in Anaheim, although she does not share the depth of passion for him that he displays for her. Ryszard is eternally curious and ready for new experiences, always ready for the next story. Ryszard is



adaptable to the New World, as is Maryna, but is also the first one to challenge her about whether the commune is truly what she wants to do with her life. After their encounter in San Francisco, Ryszard returns to Poland where he marries someone else.

Bogdan Dembowski

Maryna's husband, who is a few years older than her and in his mid-30s, Bogdan is a solidly middle class person of the Old World who nonetheless understands the arts and appreciates Maryna as an artist. He carries the meaningless title of count although he is not wealthy. When Maryna's American manager wants to call her "the Polish countess," she is embarrassed but goes along with it - for a while - to further her career. Bogdan seems to be the most practical of the bunch of Polish expatriates who start the commune in California.

His money and business acumen enable them to lease the farmland, and his business sense helps him secure property on the coast after the commune fails. Although solidly grounded, Bogdan does have an interesting taste for the whimsical in his fascination with a fledgling aircraft company in California and there is considerable discussion between him and Maryna about whether he should go aloft. He also suspects his wife's affair with Ryszard but does nothing to confront the issue. In his private diary, Bogdan confesses to homosexual yearnings for some of the Mexican youths who come to work at the commune

Henryk Tyszynski

Henryk is another of Maryna's admirers and would-be lovers in Poland, who also happens to be the family physician. Maryna writes long, soul-searching letters to Henryk as a sort of psychotherapy, by which the reader gains insights into her behavior and feelings. Henryk comes for a visit to see Maryna and her entourage in California, but returns to Poland where he carries on an energetic correspondence with the actress.

Heinrich Zalezowski

Heinrich is a Pole of German descent who was Maryna's first husband although there is a difference of almost 30 years in their ages. He remains mostly an unpleasant memory for Maryna.

Jakub Goldberg

Jakub is a promising young painter who goes with Maryna's retinue to the resort town of Zakopane in the Tatra Mountains where the group decides on a plan to emigrate to America.



Stefan

Stefan is Maryna's younger half-brother with whom she is close. He dies of tuberculosis just before she leaves for America.

Julian Solski

Julian is a schoolteacher who, with his wife Wanda, joins the group of expatriate Poles who form a commune in California. This couple returns to Poland after the commune fails.

Aniela

Aniela is a young Polish girl who joins the ymigry group as a domestic servant and who turns out to be a poor worker.

Mildred Collingridge

Miss Collingridge is a voice and speech tutor who works with Maryna in San Francisco to help her overcome her Polish accent.

Angus Barton

Angus is Maryna's first theatrical agent in America who gets her bookings in San Francisco.

Henry Warnock

Henry becomes Maryna's manager and expands her bookings nationwide. He also suggests she change her stage name to Marina.



Objects/Places

Warsaw, Poland

Maryna's professional home and the center of Polish cultural life. This is where the novel begins.

Zakopane

A resort town in the Tatra Mountains on the southern border of Poland, where Maryna and her friends first attempt communal living and where they plan their trip to America.

Krakow

Krakow is the Polish city that is Maryna's home and the place where her brother dies.

Liverpool, England

Liverpool is the port city where Ryszard and Julian begin the migration to America.

New York City

New York city is the first stopping point for the Poles on their journey to California. There they get their first taste of America.

Isthmus of Panama

The Isthmus of Panama is the narrow land mass where the Polish travelers take a train to the Pacific Ocean, on their journey to San Francisco.

San Francisco

San Francisco is another cosmopolitan city on the West Coast, and a stopping point before the immigrants head south to their commune.

Anaheim, California

A small town in Southern California settled by Germans, Anaheim is close to the ranch where the Polish group has leased a ranch to create their commune.



SS Germanic

The SS Germanic is the steamship that carries Ryszard and Julian to the United States.

London, England

Maryna makes a successful English debut in London after establishing herself as a major actress in America.

Paris, France

Maryna and her husband Bogdan go shopping for new outfits in Paris after her English stage triumphs.

Themes

Search for an Authentic Self

As an actress, Maryna represents the epitome of mutability: her success on the stage depends directly upon her ability to assume different personas. Although she seems to have some genuine affection for her husband Bogdan, even he is not exempt from her tendency to use other people as minor characters in the drama of her own life. She flirts with and eventually sleeps with the writer Ryszard but it appears that she is merely playing another scene, and that her affections for him do not run deeper than the surface. Likewise, her relationships with other people, such as her friend Henryk, are primarily centered on herself. Maryna appears to have no relationship with her son Piotr at all; he is essentially an irritation who gets in the way of her career. With Maryna, paradoxically, the search for an authentic self becomes both a means and an end as she realizes that the stage is her life.

She finds her true identity as an actress, someone whose identity is through various masks. Maryna even admits to herself that she is unable to tell the truth. To a somewhat lesser degree, all the members of the Polish group who immigrate to Southern California search for some kind of new identities in the New World. Maryna's husband Bogdan becomes fascinated with an aircraft company that symbolizes his desire to be transported from the mundane everyday world into some other realm. As a group, the Polish settlers seek an idealized community of artists and workers in their commune but fail in their enterprise because of resentments over distribution of workload and lack of skills as business entrepreneurs. To a certain extent, too, their failure is a reflection of a failure to visualize and actualize new roles, new potentials, for themselves in America.

Nature of Reality

"In America" demonstrates in the lives of its characters how human beings create their own realities from their belief systems, hopes, and expectations. In the opening of the book, the reader is introduced to a social gathering in Warsaw where the dazzling young actress, Maryna Zalezowski, moves in a world populated with her admirers and fellow actors. She has created her own reality on the stage, although she temporarily puts that aside to move to America with her husband, son, and group of communalist friends. Maryna is such a magnetic personality that her dream, or imagined reality, of a better life in America draws in a group of admirers. They are charmed by the charismatic actress and convinced that going to America will enable them to find a new and happier reality free from the limitations of the past.

Bogdan, her husband, has created his reality centered on Maryna and their family although he senses that she needs to be allowed space to have her own creative life. Once in America, he discovers a new reality about himself: a homoerotic attraction to young Mexican boys that he pushes aside. For all the members of the group, coming to



America both challenges and fosters their realities. The journalist Ryszard writes magazine pieces on the New World but finds his deeper reality involves his desire for Maryna. When that relationship collapses, he returns to his original reality of Poland. The schoolteacher Julian and his wife Wanda also discover that their new reality in America cannot sustain them, and they return to Poland after Wanda's attempted suicide. Only in the protean personality of Maryna, able to create and then live in new roles for herself, is there evidence of real success among the immigrants in creating successful new realities for themselves.

Independence of Women

If nothing else, Maryna represents a kind of prototypical liberated woman. Her life is a kind of archetype for generations of women who follow. Coming from a disadvantaged background where she gets married at the age of 16 and has a child, Maryna creates a career for herself as an actress and is at the top of her profession in Warsaw when the story begins. It is Maryna's sense of confidence and adventure that makes the trip to a communal experiment in America possible. In this adventure, she sacrifices her professional career for this effort at extended family living. Some of her enthusiasm for the commune wanes as Maryna realizes that there is an inequitable distribution of work between men and women, which is when she decides to revive her acting career. However, she leaves the door open for her husband to tell her that she should quit acting - a sign perhaps that she has not fully made the transition to independence.

Rather quickly, the commune falters. Most of the other women in the commune who do not have professional careers to fall back on return with their husbands to Poland, or go to another commune such as the nearby Edenica. Maryna also is capable of having an affair with Ryszard without letting it destroy her marriage. Maryna finds strong role models for the independent woman in America in the person of an itinerant photographer who takes a picture of the group, then drinks a glass of whiskey before breakfast - and in a pistol-packing cowgirl she encounters in California's Gold Rush country.

Style

Points of View

The points of view shift throughout the novel. In Chapter 0, the point of view is that of an invisible fly-on-the-wall who appears at a social gathering in Warsaw on a cold wintry night. The narrator scans the room and describes the various characters, wondering about their relationships, then decides to follow them outside into the snow and into their lives. As the tale progresses, the point of view shifts among the various characters from Maryna to Bogdan to Ryszard and back to the narrator. Telegrams, letters, and diaries shift the point of view from one character to another, and move the action forward. The fluid point of view illustrates that there are many different ways of understanding events within the novel. For example, at the same time that Bogdan is a faithful, devoted husband to Maryna, he discovers within himself a lust for the young Mexican laborers who work on their home in California.

Bogdan does not share this experience, or point of view, with anyone, but an important aspect of his personality is revealed. Likewise, Maryna's flirtation and eventual affair with Ryszard provides another point of view on the narrative, and may partially help to explain why the commune does not succeed. Ryszard's point of view, as a character in the novel, shifts from participant to objective journalist as he tries to capture the experience of coming to America.

Again, this point of view offers another glimpse of Maryna's personality, which is central to all the action in the novel. The omniscient point of view is confined to those times when the story must be told from outside the characters, as when some of Maryna's early background in the theater is described. The skillful shifting of points of view sustains the reader's interest and gives a more rounded picture of the numerous characters and their motivations. It becomes apparent that all the characters that participate in the communal experiment have their own mixed motives and points of view, which produce different actions.

Setting

The novel opens in Warsaw, where the reader is introduced to the theatrical and artistic circle of Maryna Zalezowski. One gets a sense of the cultural elite of Poland, enjoying themselves and each other, secure in their successes and accomplishments. Although these are talented and imaginative people, there is a restless energy in the group to create a better life outside the confines of the Old World. Then the setting shifts to Zakopane, a quaint resort town in the Tatra Mountains, where some of the same group visit for an extended vacation that morphs into an attempt to form a quasi-communal lifestyle. They love the natural beauty and the peacefulness of the mountains but realize the impracticality of their experiment. After one winter, the urbanites decide to go to



America where opportunities abound and where they want to start a commune in the Santa Ana Mountains of Southern California.

In the process of relocating, the Poles stop briefly in New York and San Francisco, where they soak up some of the cultural and ethnic diversity of America. Maryna is thrilled by the theater in New York, and the opportunity to see the famed actor Edwin Booth. Everyone in the group is energized and stimulated by New York and San Francisco, where they experience an openness and freedom new to them. The setting for most of story is their commune near Anaheim, California. Once Maryna decides to revive her acting career, the setting then shifts all over America as she goes on tour in her own private railroad car, presenting performances in every place from small mining towns to large cities. There are also visits to London and Paris, where she is acclaimed as a great actress.

Language and Meaning

Because of the wide geographic setting of the novel, there is an abundance of Polish, German, with a bit of French and Spanish thrown in with the English narrative. The great bulk of the story is told in rather mainstream American English, however, which makes it accessible to readers who are not particularly interested in pursuing the translations of meanings of some of the foreign phrases. Language is a big part of the story, as when Maryna seeks a speech tutor in San Francisco to help her overcome her Polish accent. There is a series of painful scenes where Maryna is corrected over her pronunciation of English, but at the same time her manager tells her that the accent is charming and appealing to American audiences.

Writing idiosyncrasies that may actually serve as impediments to the reader include the use of phrases instead of complete sentences ("Wind rising. Constellations pulsing. Earth turning. People breeding..."), and portions of narrative broken into short quotations that shift from speaker to speaker without clear identification. For the most part, the language is effective in conveying the intended meaning but an excess of foreign phrases and the occasional stylistic indulgences tend to slow the action and create barriers. The pacing of the language is well suited to the action, accelerating in some places and slowing in others.

Structure

With meticulously detailed descriptions of people and places, the story proceeds in chronological fashion - devoid of flashbacks, flash-forwards, and tortured internal monologues that have been popular in fiction. Within the narrative, there are several different prose styles; from laconic and subjective to staccato and fast-paced. The writing style when the characters are in Poland is slower and more formalized to give a feeling for the rigidities and constraints of Europe. Once the communalists reach California, however, the writing style becomes lighter and faster-paced to reflect how the immigrants feel in their new environment. Throughout, most of the structure of the novel



is essentially conventional without stylistic innovations that would rank it with the same degree of originality that, say, "Finnegan's Wake" brought to the novel form.

An exception to this is the first chapter where there is a sense of moving about the room during a party, shifting one's attention from one person to another to take in the entire scene as well as individuals. One is drawn into a kind of guessing game about who the various characters are and what might happen to them. In this sense, the first chapter depends upon the "willing suspension of disbelief" without which theatrical success would be impossible, as well as the premise for the novel.

Another exception is the last chapter where the actor Edwin Booth unleashes a booze-fueled monologue that, although realistic, is difficult to follow because of its elliptical trajectory of meaning. Its incoherence ends the novel on a bizarre and uncertain note. One is left to wonder about Maryna's fate, even though she has reached the pinnacle of success as an actor in America. The most "modern" literary device employed largely is that of shifting scenes and points of view. At times, this technique adds reader interest and at other times it can be confusing. In addition, there is a minimum of foreshadowing which assumes the omniscient point of view, but which can also make a modern novel read like something from another century.



Quotes

"No longer in her first youth, as people then said of an attractive woman past thirty, of medium height, straight-spined, with a pile of ash-blond hair into which she nervously tucked a few escaping strands, she [Maryna] was not exceptionally beautiful". Chapter 1, p. 4

"Granted, she [Maryna] could not tell the truth. But there was so much energy in her for saying something, and making others listen. A woman could not say much. A diva could say too much. As a diva, with a diva's permissions, she could have tantrums, she could ask for the impossible, she could lie". Chapter 1, p. 41.

"God is an actor, too". Chapter 2, p. 59.

"You are whatever you think you are, Ryszard said to himself. Whatever you dare think you are. And to be free to think yourself something you're not (not yet), something better than what you are - isn't that the true freedom promised by the country to which he was journeying"? Chapter 3, p. 93.

"Love, a voluptuous sacrifice of judgment. Love, the shape-shifter - changing as much in the absence as in the presence of the beloved. The variety of his [Ryszard's] feelings for Maryna enchanted him. One day it was lust, pure lust. The next day it was fascination. Another day: it's only (only!) her beauty". Chapter 3, p. 111.

"Ryszard had the writer's perpetually available blankness of mind". Chapter 3, p. 118.

"To be done with mourning! To live in the present! In the sun! She [Maryna] was soaking up light. She thought she could actually feel the desert's glare sealing her skin, drying up tears shed and unshed...To change one's life: it's as easy as taking off a glove". Chapter 5, p. 159.

"April 14. Forbidden desire, straining to be liberated by foreignness. The curse on desire. But there is no puzzle about how I can be so strongly drawn to these boys and wholly in love with M [Maryna]. Loving her is the one steadiness I have". [Bogdan's diary] Chapter 6, p. 212.

"May 4. It [the commune] can fail. But I must not fail. I must not fail M [Maryna]. We don't produce most of what we need. We don't sell most of what we produce". Chapter 6. p. 221.

"It wasn't a new life M [Maryna] wanted, it was a new self. Our community has been an instrument for that, and now she is bent on returning to the stage". Chapter 6, p. 228

"It felt like an escapade; like leaving home; like telling lies - and she [Maryna] would tell many lies. She was beginning again; she was rejoining her destiny, which conferred on her the rich sensation that she had never gone astray". Chapter 7, p. 229.



"Truth was, Ryszard had never fully believed that Maryna would one day be his. His love for Maryna, at its truest, had been draped by a stinging sense of the unlikelihood of its consummation. And he had hated wanting something he thought he could not have. You get what you want, and that makes everything right". Chapter 7, p. 264.

"It felt so natural to Maryna to be engulfed by admiration, as it did to have found the freedom to accept Ryszard's love. If there was a voice that said to her, Such an idyll cannot last, she could not hear it". Chapter 7, p. 273.

"Ryszard stopped. He began to cry. It wasn't only because he was losing Maryna. It was the end of his youth: of his ability to love worshipfully, suffer unprotectedly. What would he dream of when he no longer dreamt of Maryna? This, thought Ryszard, is the most painful feeling I shall ever have". Chapter 7, p. 292.

"In contrast to the stage, where a woman's adultery never went unpunished, real life as Maryna noted gratefully did not have to be a melodrama. Life was a long hot soak in the tub, life was a glycerine massage and a pedicure. Life was never being idle, trying always to surpass oneself, having three new wigs made, throwing a canary out a stage window, making strangers cry". Chapter 8, p. 303

"Authority on the stage is tantamount to the ability to project continuously, fluently, piercingly a character's essence. In nature there are many off-duty moments, many unessential gestures; in the theatre characters reveal their essence all the time". Chapter 8, p. 305

"When you are falling into the dark, Maryna, it becomes hard to imagine that, after you are gone, the light will still exist. Yes, once we understand, really understand, that we are going to die, astronomy is the only consolation". Chapter 9, p. 386



Topics for Discussion

Is Maryna's ability to play different roles onstage and offstage a strength or weakness - or both?

How does Maryna's life demonstrate a woman's search for self-transformation and independence?

Having failed in their first attempt to create a utopian community in the Tatra Mountains of Poland, why does the group then decide to try again in America?

To what extent does the relative freedom of the New World enable Bogdan to experience his homosexual urges and Maryna to become aware of an attraction to Miss Collingridge, her voice tutor?

What is it about Poland and the Old World do the immigrants want to leave behind?

Discuss the role of Maryna and Ryszard as catalysts for each other's growth. Did they "use" each other in that growth or was there genuine affection?

What parallels do the visit of the evangelicals to Maryna's theater to warn her of moral transgressions have with today's world?

To what extent are the Polish commune dwellers able to throw off their stereotypical roles in society and to achieve an equitable community? To what extent do their successes and failures prefigure the rise and eventual demise of world communism?

Discuss some of the roles of women, both in Poland and in America, illustrated within the novel - particularly in relationship to men.

Does Bogdan use his marriage to Maryna to disguise his homosexual tendencies that become apparent once the group is in America?

To what extent does the experience of the Polish commune in America prefigure the rise and eventual failure of world communism? Why?

What is the author's attitude toward the characters - particularly Maryna Zalezowski?

Discuss sociopath tendencies latent in the gun-slinging, rootless, cowgirl characters who Maryna encounters and admires in California.