

Inferno Study Guide

Inferno by Eileen Myles

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Plot Summary

The following version of this book was used to create this study guide: Myles, Eileen. *Inferno: A Poet's Novel*. OR Books, 2016.

Inferno: A Poet's Novel is a fictionalized memoir based on the life of the author, poet Eileen Myles. The structure of the novel is inspired by the *Divine Comedy* by Dante Alighieri, which is divided into three parts: "Inferno," "Purgatorio," and "Paradiso." *Inferno: A Poet's Novel* largely concerns Eileen Myles' life as a poet in New York City and is similarly divided into three parts. Eileen functions as both the novel's narrator and its main subject, conveying accounts of major events in her life, as well as relating her thoughts and feeling regarding those events.

The first section largely deals with Eileen's early years living in New York City, but it opens with an anecdote from her days attending college at the University of Massachusetts Boston. There, Eileen developed a mentor-mentee relationship with one of her English professors, Eva Nelson, on whom Eileen had a latent crush. Mrs. Nelson praised Eileen's poetry writing, and this encouraged Eileen to pursue poetry and creative writing as a career. After graduating, Eileen moved to New York City, where she lived in relative poverty and worked various odd jobs to support herself while working on her own writing and establishing her presence in the New York poetry scene. Eileen attended graduate school at Queens College, but she dropped out not long after enrolling. However, while doing research for a professor there, she discovered the St. Mark's Poetry Project and decided that she wished to become involved in that organization. This section also includes an anecdote regarding a time that Eileen tried to make money by sleeping with a man in exchange for payment. The anecdote is told in parts throughout the section, and it represents a moment of great shame and desperation for the young Eileen.

The second section of the novel is loosely structured like a grant proposal, but it generally consists of a series of personal anecdotes, just like the rest of the novel. This section largely focuses upon Eileen's actual artistic career, when she was able to support herself mostly on money made from her artistic endeavors. The section discusses several poetry and performance pieces of which Eileen was quite proud. Eileen even received major arts grants to fund these pieces. These pieces were largely political, dealing with important social issues of the time such as issues of feminism, women's rights, and gay rights (as Eileen realized after moving to New York that she was in fact a lesbian.) This section also describes various examples of Eileen's growing influence and connectedness regarding the New York arts scene. Eileen's work gained the interest of a successful and wealthy artist named Eden O'Malley, who supported and promoted Eileen. Eileen also began to have interesting opportunities to travel and perform, such as when she took a tour of Germany to do poetry readings with friends and acquaintances who were also poets. Other exciting travel opportunities for her included visiting Dante's grave on a travel grant and going to Hawaii for a poetry reading.



The final section of the novel is entitled “Heaven” and mostly concerns Eileen’s journey of personal and sexual self-discovery. Eileen discusses the significant intersection of art, poetry, identity, and sexuality in her life. She tells about her time working for a publishing company after graduating from college and realizing that poetry was more real and more important to her than having a steady office job. She then relates the journey of her sexual self-discovery in New York City, stating that poetry and the people around her were both integral factors in that journey. She says that poetry helped her to explore her own identity, and she says that her journey towards her sexual self-discovery culminated when she had a brief yet passionate sexual relationship with a young woman named Rose Lomak. Eileen then had a long series of female sexual partners, and she was able to become comfortable in her new identity thanks to the company and writings of other gay poets. In the end, Eileen says that she was able to reach a heavenly state of peace and fulfillment thanks to all of these factors and journeys, whether they were artistic, sexual, personal, political, or any number of other things that affected her life after moving to New York City.



Pages 1 - 61

Summary

Pages 1 – 14: Eileen begins the novel by discussing one of her English teachers at the University of Massachusetts Boston. The teacher's name was Eva Nelson, and Eileen found Mrs. Nelson's body quite attractive. Eileen explains in narration that she originally lived in Arlington, Massachusetts, and the only schools attended she attended before college were catholic schools. One of the required readings in Mrs. Nelson's class was *The Divine Comedy* by Dante Alighieri. Mrs. Nelson assigned the students to each write a personal piece about the world around them inspired by the social critiques in Dante's work. Eileen wrote her piece in poetry form, and Mrs. Nelson is very impressed with it.

Pages 15 – 28: Eileen then discusses an incident that occurred when she was living in New York City in her mid-twenties. She met a woman named Rita at a bar. Rita was also an aspiring writer, although she admitted that she had been supporting herself in New York by sleeping with men in exchange for money. She tried to recruit Eileen for a date with two Italian handbag salesmen, implying that they would be paid for their time. Through narration, Eileen then expositis upon her relatively impoverished lifestyle in New York, and then she transitions back to the story about Eva Nelson, commenting on how her teacher's support inspired her to pursue a career as a poet.

Pages 29 – 42: Eileen accepted Rita's proposition on the pretext that they would only have to have dinner with the men. Through narration, Eileen then relays more details to the reader about her early years in New York City. She moved there after college to pursue a career in the arts, and in her first years there, she mostly worked in bars to support herself while she wrote poetry. At one bar, she even worked as a bouncer, and she developed acquaintances with many other young struggling citizens of the city. She mentions that she attended Queens College for a short period of time to study poetry in graduate school. There, she came to admire poets James Schuyler and Frank O'Hara, and one of her professors paid her to perform research on various buildings around the city. Doing this research, she became familiar with the St. Mark's Poetry Project, which met regularly at St. Mark's Church.

Pages 43 – 53: Eileen discusses her financial and social lives of her twenties. She says she worked at bars and sold rolls of change in subway stations to make ends meet, and she only worked as much as necessary to pay her bills. She spent the rest of her time socializing or working on her poetry or meeting people involved in the New York poetry scene. Eileen dropped out of Queens College not long after enrolling, and she felt lost. She continued to support herself and to write and to make connections with other writers. One performance venue she frequented was a bar called CBGB's, which became increasingly famous and hosted many rock musicians and poets who had a seemingly rock-inspired aesthetic. At CBGB's, Eileen met Patti Smith, a talented musician and poet who went on to become very well known.



Pages 54 – 61: Eileen then discusses Paul Blackburn, a well-known and influential poet who was also the founder of the St. Mark's Poetry Project. Eileen states that the St. Mark's Poetry Project was a central venue for many of the city's best poets, and Eileen found herself highly drawn to St. Mark's for this very reason. Eileen then discusses the nature of the New York poetry scene, stating that its participants all wrestled with their own identities and the best ways of exploring and expressing those identities through poetry and performance.

Analysis

The allusion to *The Divine Comedy* at the beginning of the novel is very significant with regards to how the novel itself is structured. As the novel progresses, it becomes increasingly evident that its structure roughly parallels the structure of *The Divine Comedy*, which is divided into three parts: *Inferno*, *Purgatorio*, and *Paradiso*. The story of the *Divine Comedy* follows Dante Alighieri, the author of the work, as he travels through hell, then purgatory, and then finally ascends to heaven. Similarly, *Inferno: A Poet's Novel* recounts Eileen's life as if it were similarly divided into three parts. The first part seems modeled after *Inferno*, recounting the many struggles and hardships Eileen encounters as an aspiring artist in New York City. Eileen struggles with money and questions of her own identity. And her experiences are both painful and useful, just like Dante's frightening tour of hell.

The mentorship of Mrs. Nelson appears to have been very important to Eileen, and the narrative frames Mrs. Nelson as a key figure in motivating Eileen to become a poet. Mrs. Nelson praised Eileen's writing and helped to guide her independent reading and studying with regards to poetry. Mrs. Nelson also appears to be an important figure with regards to Eileen's discovery of her own sexuality. Eileen is a self-proclaimed lesbian, but she did not fully come to terms with this until she had already been living in New York for years. However, she comments in her narration that she was very attracted to Mrs. Nelson and now looks back at this attraction as a key moment on her journey of sexual self-discovery.

The episode involving Rita appears to illustrate the very worst parts of Eileen's early life in New York, thus helping to develop the parallel between this section of the book and the *Inferno* section of the *Divine Comedy*. The story told in short sections throughout the first part of the novel, and it already appears to involve elements of shame, desperateness, and sexual revulsion. Although Rita claims that they will only have to have dinner with the men, the narration seems to foreshadow that Eileen will have to have sex with one of the Italian businessmen if she wishes to benefit financially from the date. This dynamic contains aspects of both sexual and financial humiliation. Moreover, the fact that her sexual partner in this situation would be a man, this further debases Eileen by clashing with her implied lesbianism. Thus, the narrative seems to spend so much time focusing on this one anecdote because it captures so many elements of shame and hardship that Eileen experienced in her early years in New York.



The narrative contrasts the difficulties of Eileen's early years in New York with the excitement and promise of the New York poetry scene, where Eileen was able to find a community and begin to explore her own identity. Eileen's narration describes the New York poetry scene in very exciting and personal terms, mentioning her close proximity to great artists like Patti Smith. However, the true excitement for Eileen appears to be the communion she feels with other young artists struggling to make their way in the city, find their artistic voice, and discover their own true identity. Eileen is described as somewhat of an outsider from this community in her twenties, but the New York poetry scene seems to represent a refuge from the hardships of her youth. Although often harried by financial worries and struggles of identity, the young Eileen seems to identify poetry and the poetry community as the key sources from which she may potentially derive purpose and a sense of fulfillment.

Discussion Question 1

Discuss the significance of Dante's Divine Comedy in this section. How does it relate to Eileen's personal life and to the themes of the narrative?

Discussion Question 2

What appear to be the most significant aspects of Eileen's early years in New York City as described by her? What significance do these aspects of her life have with relation to the overall narrative?

Discussion Question 3

What is Eileen's relationship with poetry and the New York poetry scene when she is in her twenties? How do these relationships appear to affect her outlook on life, work, and art?

Vocabulary

jounce, torrent, allegory, formica, obscene, accommodate, immoderate, delude, prospect, smother, twang, embroil, discotheque, clamber, nihilistic, manacle, venerate, harem, tenement, ancillary



Pages 62 – 114

Summary

Pages 62 – 70: Eileen briefly mentions that she and Rita went to meet the Italian handbag salesman for their double date. They met at a restaurant, and the man with whom Eileen was paired was named Attilio Viola. Eileen then discusses several men she had dated before coming out as gay. She reflects upon these days of being a young struggling poet as “just so much crenellated waste, nights and days whipping swiftly or laboriously past the cinematic window” (65). One poet friend she had was named Bill Knott, whom she met when she was still living in the Boston area. Eileen implies that she may have had a romantic relationship with him, and she comments to the reader that she was very impressed by his naturalism when performing poetry.

Pages 70 – 84: Eileen’s father died a few years before she moved to New York. Eileen discusses how the bustle of city life seemed to replace the energy of family relationships. She says that she was a voracious reader with an eclectic and active lifestyle, exploring various aspects of life in the city so that she could observe herself and others for artistic inspiration. Eileen then discusses her relationship with money during her early years in New York. She had very little of it, and she recounts a couple embarrassing ways she tried to make money: she briefly mentions Attilio Viola, and then she talks about the time she tried to work in massage parlor. Her job was to give men sexual releases by hand, but she was unable to go through with it, and she quit immediately. Eileen then briefly discusses a boy named Brian, with whom she almost formed a romantic attachment when she was young and still living in Massachusetts. However, shortly after they met, Brian accidentally drowned in the ocean on the coast of Cape Cod.

Pages 85 – 100: Eileen continues and then concludes the episode about her and Attilio Viola. She eventually goes to his hotel room with him, and they have sex. However, when she gets ready to leave in the morning, he does not offer her any money. The next section of the book begins in the form of a grant proposal written by Eileen. Eileen states that this section of the novel coincides with the second section of the Divine Comedy, which is entitled Purgatorio. Eileen states that this section focuses on her career as a poet. Eileen’s grant proposal quickly becomes a series of personal anecdotes, just like the rest of the novel. Eileen tells a story about when she went to Milton, New York to work on a farm picking fruit. She intended to use the experience as the subject for a writing project, but she left Milton soon after arriving because the work paid very little and she was unable to find affordable housing.

Pages 101 – 114: Eileen discusses seeing a poetry reading by Marge Piercy, a poet whom Eileen greatly admires and respects. Eileen went to the reading with friends. Eileen was middle-aged at the time. The reading was a benefit show to support housing for low-income residents of the city, and Eileen and her friends discussed the intersection of art and economics while waiting for the show to begin. Eileen tried to talk



to Marge Piercy afterwards, but Marge Piercy was clearly not in the mood to talk to strangers at that time. Eileen then discusses a poetry performance piece she wrote and directed about Joan of Arc. Eileen describes it as a feminist piece that was very well received. She says that it possibly stands as her best work.

Analysis

Eileen further develops the personal and sexual humiliation of her date with Attilio Viola by comparing it to several heterosexual relationships she had before coming out as gay. When Eileen refers to this time in her life as “just so much crenellated waste, nights and days whipping swiftly or laboriously past the cinematic window” (65), she is alluding to the laborious process of discovering one’s identity through trial and error. Thus, her relationships with men are characterized as both useful and a waste of time, because they did not fulfill her, but they did help move her towards the things that actually do fulfill her. Similarly, the time she spent with Attilio Viola was quite traumatic for her, but it did help motivate her in a more positive and fulfilling direction. This is similar to Eileen’s very brief time working in a supposed massage parlor, where she found herself unable to demean herself by giving men manual sexual release in exchange for money.

These incidences of failed personal experimentation are again contrasted with more positive areas of Eileen’s early years in New York, and again these positive areas mostly involve positive social and artistic pursuits. Through all the exhaustion and confusion of her twenties, Eileen was always able to return to poetry as a way of expressing negative feelings and generating positive ones. Eileen describes poetry as a way of contextualizing the stressful nature of her life in the city as a series of important experiences that serve as worthy subjects for artistic enterprises. Eileen’s rather shocking and isolated anecdote about Brian seems to be related to this mode of thinking. Her friendship and uncomfortable budding romance with Brian end in tragedy when Brian accidentally drowns in the ocean. This tragic event is not stripped of its tragedy by being recounted in an artistic form, but Eileen seems able to contextualize the event into something useful and meaningful by writing about it in the novel.

The second of the novel’s three major sections corresponds with Dante’s Purgatorio and Eileen’s poetry career in its stages of growing substance; this section thus likens the work of practicing one’s chosen craft as a way of raising oneself above hard circumstances and rising to a more desirable state of being. To elaborate, purgatory represents a place in which the souls of the deceased must wait while they expiate all remaining sins in the hopes of ascending to heaven. For Eileen, purgatory is the state of practicing one’s craft and exploring one’s identity in order to attain a more stable and fulfilling existence. Thus, this section appears to be concerned with the period of life when Eileen’s personal and artistic efforts start to yield some substantive results. One good example of this is Eileen’s piece about Joan of Arc, which Eileen describes as one of her best pieces of work. The piece was quite well received in the poetry community, and Eileen was quite satisfied with its artistic merits and the way it promoted feminist ideas.



Discussion Question 1

What significance does the character of Attilio Viola hold? How does the anecdote involving Attilio Viola and Eileen interact with the themes and content of the rest of the narrative?

Discussion Question 2

Discuss the anecdote about Eileen's trip to Milton, New York. How does Eileen describe this event? What narrative and/or purpose does the anecdote serve?

Discussion Question 3

Compare and contrast Eileen's description of meeting Marge Piercy and Eileen's description of her performance piece about Joan of Arc. What type of juxtaposition do these anecdotes create by being conveyed one right after the other?

Vocabulary

recede, inflame, eclectic, velum, anecdotal, laborious, splendor, excoriate, infinitesimal, squalid, incarnate, susceptible, lurid, abysmal, measly, brood, lenient, clemency, blare, enumeration



Pages 115 - 167

Summary

Pages 115 – 122: Eileen discusses a play she wrote and produced in 1990, when she was about 40 years old. The play was called “Modern Art,” and she received a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts for the project. Eileen states that the play was highly political because 1990 was a highly political time, with many people protesting for gay rights and the rights of those diagnosed with HIV/AIDS. The play was a series of vignettes promoting various progressive social and political ideas. Eileen then discusses her standing in the poetry world at that time. She says that she was the artistic director of the St. Mark’s Poetry Project from 1984 to 1987. She says that as a Caucasian feminist and lesbian writer, she often had to defend her artwork and point of view from those who either believed that her artistic intentions were invalid or that her execution of feminist themes in her work was done incorrectly.

Pages 123 – 131: Eileen then discusses the various logistical and interpersonal difficulties of rehearsing her play, “Modern Art.” She says that while she was able to recruit many talented artists to collaborate on the project, not all of them seemed fully invested in the work, which caused frustration for Eileen. However, she found comfort in this time by adopting a dog, which she named Rose. Before one of the final performances of “Modern Art,” Eileen gave an impassioned speech to the performers about the vital necessity of the work they were doing. This speech seemed to help re-inspire both Eileen and the performers with regards to the project.

Pages 132 – 159: Eileen then mentions Eden O’Malley, a wealthy and successful artist who took a great interest in Eileen’s work. Eden owned a house in Belfast, Ireland, and she invited Eileen to stay there for a few months. Eileen took Eden up on the offer and brought her dog Rose along with her. Eileen spent her time there reading and writing and walking through the nearby woods with Rose. Eileen then talks about a well-known poem she wrote called “An American Poem.” In the poem, she writes from the perspective of a fictitious member of the Kennedy family who cast off her privileged roots and ran away to New York City to become a struggling poet. Eileen says that although the poem became fairly famous, her own personal fame did not grow very much. She says that fame is a tricky concept and is not something necessarily worth pursuing or spending much time thinking about. Eileen says that she imagines the fictional Kennedy as a combination of herself and Rory Kennedy, whom she met one time at a friend’s wedding.

Pages 160 – 167: Eileen discusses a time when she did a series of poetry readings in Germany with several of other female poets, including her friend Kathy Acker. Eileen describes her relationship with Kathy as somewhat uneven, with periods of friction between the. At one of the poetry readings, a German audience member asked why American artists focused on sex so much more than on politics. Kathy and another poet replied angrily, saying, “Sex is political. Feminist politics are political” (161). Eileen then



briefly discusses the simultaneous meaninglessness and allure of awards in the poetry world. She recounts a time when Allen Ginsberg begged President Clinton for an award and received nothing. She also mentions that she felt no affection for the famous poet Robert Lowell, even when he died, for he stood for far more traditional and mainstream values than Eileen.

Analysis

Eileen's play entitled *Modern Art* is representative of relatively substantial influence that Eileen gained in artistic world, thus further developing her progression from struggling artist to successful artist. *Modern Art* was funded by a grant from the National Endowment of the Arts, thus distinguishing the project as important enough to warrant a major government grant. The grant also has certain economic implications, meaning that Eileen was able to make money as an artist instead of simply pursuing art in her spare time while supporting herself with whatever work she could find. Moreover, Eileen is able to recruit many talented artists for the project, thus demonstrating the strong connections she developed in the New York arts scene over the years. Some of these connections were developed when Eileen was the artistic director of the St. Mark's Poetry project, which is another marker of Eileen's growing success. In the first section of the novel, Eileen was simply an outsider looking to become involved in the Poetry Project, and she was eventually able to become the program's artistic director.

The production of *Modern Art* also helps to showcase the significant development in Eileen's personal and artistic identities. Firstly, the play was highly political, thus demonstrating the clear direction and purpose that Eileen's work developed over the years. The play was very relevant to important social and political themes of the time, including feminist ideals and gay rights, thus demonstrating the power and relevancy of Eileen's work that helped fuel her growing success. Secondly, the play reflects a significant development in Eileen's personal identity, as she had finally come to terms with being gay and was willing to explore and promote this identity through her work. Thirdly, the actual rehearsal and performance process of the piece demonstrates the development of Eileen's collaborative abilities. Although the collaborative process presented some difficulties for Eileen, she was able to push through them and re-inspire both herself and the performers with regards to the value of the work.

Eileen explores themes of class, money, and social status by discussing her friendship with Eden O'Malley. Although Eden is an artist as well, she occupies a very different socio-economic sphere from Eileen, as Eden is quite wealthy. It is unclear how much of Eden's money actually came from art, but regardless, Eileen acknowledges some seemingly fundamental difference between herself and Eden. Eileen very much enjoys staying at Eileen's house in Belfast, but the house seems to represent a separation between them. Eden is like an artistic patron of Eileen, but the socio-economic divide between them means that they lead very different lives. Eileen further explores these themes by discussing her poem, *An American Poem*. Eileen contrasts her life of relative poverty and obscurity with the life of a Kennedy, who would be born into wealth and



fame and power. However, Eileen's poem seems to promote the idea that personal and artistic integrity outweigh all benefits of money and power.

Discussion Question 1

What is the specific content of Eileen's play entitled *Modern Art* and how does this content relate to Eileen's own life, values, and experiences?

Discussion Question 2

Discuss the significance of the St Mark's poetry Project in Eileen's life on both a literal and symbolic level. How has the Poetry Project helped to shape Eileen's personal journey?

Discussion Question 3

What appears to be the significance of Eileen's friendship with Eden O'Malley. How is their friendship characterized, and what appear to be Eileen's most significant thoughts regarding this relationship?

Vocabulary

alibi, euphoric, qualm, legionnaire, sluice, antipathy, pivotal, unison, silo, ingratiate, klezmer, clangor, uninflected, amble, pantoum, lyre, contagion, timeless, deluge, fertility



Pages 168 - 221

Summary

Pages 168 – 180: Eileen mentions that she visited Ravenna, Italy on a traveling grant to visit the grave of Dante Alighieri, the author of the Divine Comedy. She then contemplates her own relative obscurity before transitioning into a description of the time she spent in Pennsylvania. She lived there for a few months in another house owned by Eden O'Malley. She enjoyed her time there but felt that the wealthy neighbors looked down upon her. She then mentions a time she went to Helau, Hawaii to do a poetry reading. In Helau, she debated whether or not to hike through the hills at night to see an erupting volcano. She was in her forties at the time and feared that she might never have such an opportunity again. Thus, she decided to attempt the trek. The hike was fairly long and difficult, but she says that the sight of the erupting lava was beautiful to behold.

Pages 181 – 200: The third and final section of the book begins on page 181 and is entitled "Heaven." Eileen discusses being a lesbian and says that she didn't realize she was gay until after she had moved to New York. She comments that her poetry improved after she was able to come to terms with being gay. Eileen then recalls working in the subscription department of the publishing company Little Brown in Boston. She recalls writing poetry in her spare time at her desk in the Little Brown offices and realizing that poetry was what truly mattered to her in life. She says that after she dropped out of graduate school, the only things of meaning she had in life were poetry and an unrealized crush on a friend of hers named Alice. At the time, Eileen had not yet come to terms with being gay, but poetry and her obsession with Alice helped Eileen become more aware of her true sexual orientation. Eileen then discusses the wonderfully chaotic nature of poetry, as the form allows one to make connections between seemingly random ideas. Eileen says that this freedom of ideas and exploration in poetry was valuable to the exploration of her own identity in terms of sexuality and all other facets of her being.

Pages 201 – 221: Eileen further discusses her relationship to poetry and to her sexuality. She discusses her early artistic development and comments that she frequented a poetry workshop with Alice. Eileen made many friends through various poetry venues and workshops, and Eileen felt herself developing as an artist and a person alongside them. Eileen says that her two main poetry mentors were Alice and a man named Ted. Eileen comments that she embraced some of their teachings while also rejecting some parts. Eileen then reflects upon her process of coming out as gay. She states that it started with her own private feeling of realization. She began to privately acknowledge her attraction to women in a more attractive fashion. Eileen says that she met a young woman from Chicago named Rose Lomak and fell in love with her. She implies that Rose is the first woman with whom she ever had sex.



Analysis

Various travels of Eileen's are described in rapid succession in this section, and the accounts serve to further develop the progress Eileen has made in her life. In the first section of the novel, Eileen was not able to even make a successful long-term trip to upstate New York, but in this section, she describes trips to Italy, Pennsylvania, and Hawaii. These trips each represent different ways in which Eileen has improved her life since coming to New York. Her trip to Ravenna, Italy represents both artistic and professional success, as she is able to visit the grave of Dante, who is a great poet and a large influence upon her, and the trip is even funded by a grant. This trip thus represents both her important standing in the artistic community and her sense of artistic awareness and fulfillment. Her time in Pennsylvania represents her continued friendship with Eden O'Malley, a very well-known and discerning artist who thinks highly of Eileen and her work. These trips thus represent comforting and solid symbols of Eileen's continuing personal and artistic success.

However, Eileen's trip to Hawaii may be the most thematically significant. On the surface, it represents another marker of success, as she travels to Hawaii for a poetry reading. However, the trip she makes to the volcano serves as a powerful symbol. The fires of the volcano appear to represent the fires of the Inferno, which would in turn be a symbol for the difficulties of her early years in New York. However, Eileen views the scene from a safe distance and finds it beautiful. The scene seems to symbolize the fact that Eileen recognizes the pain and hardships of her early years, but that she is able to see how those hardships were beautiful and necessary for helping her develop as a person and as an artist.

The third and final section of the novel is entitled "heaven," thus corresponding to the final section of the Divine Comedy, "Paradiso," in which Dante ascends to heaven. This seems to imply that the final section of the book chronicles Eileen's ascent to a state of some type of peace or fulfillment. The beginning of this section deals largely with Eileen's sexuality, specifically her process of discovering that she is in fact a lesbian. Thus, Eileen's sexual self-discovery is characterized as an ascent to a more peaceful and fulfilled state. As foreshadowed earlier in the book, there exists a strong link between Eileen's poetry and her sexuality. Eileen comments in this section, "I became a lesbian in New York. It was my first or second career. It was wrecking my poetry as long as I didn't know what it was" (184). This implies that Eileen's poetry was improved once she had come to terms with her sexuality, and because poetry is characterized as a mechanism of self-exploration, a positive feedback loop between art and self-discovery is established. Along these lines, the figure of Rose is introduced with relatively heavy emphasis, foreshadowing Rose's important role in Eileen's sexual discovery. However, Eileen does not neglect to explore the vital role that poetry played in her self-discovery as a complement to the influences of those around her, such as Alice and Rose.



Discussion Question 1

Discuss Eileen's trip to Helau, Hawaii. What narrative function does this anecdote serve? How does the anecdote reflect Eileen's personal circumstances at that time in her life? What significant symbols does the anecdote appear to contain?

Discussion Question 2

The final section of the book is entitled "Heaven," functioning as a reference to the final section of the Divine Comedy. What appears to be the heaven that Eileen is seeking? What tools and experiences appear to be most integral to this journey?

Discussion Question 3

What roles do Alice and Ted play in the narrative? How do these characters influence Eileen, and how do Eileen's relationships with them interact with the themes and arc of the narrative?

Vocabulary

resentful, coda, rabid, sentiment, occlude, cacophonous, interminable, corollary, biennial, fixity, autonomous, clad, ogle, ponder, conglomerate, translucent, blithe, ghoulis, bask, miserly



Pages 222 - 270

Summary

Pages 222 – 237: The narrative relates a brief story about Eileen on Christmas Eve, 2004. The story is told from the point of view of fish in a tank in the restaurant where Eileen is dining. The fish see Eileen sitting with many women at a table, and Eileen appears to only know some of them. Eileen leaves the table and hangs out by herself near the fish. The fish philosophize among themselves about life. Then Eileen mentions a collaborative feminist book she worked on called “Ladies Museum,” which was poorly received and which some people actually thought was anti-feminist despite Eileen’s intentions. Eileen then transitions into a long discussion about her sex life after she came out as gay. Her first female sexual partner was a woman named Rose, and this led to a long series of other female sexual partners after Rose moved back to Chicago. Eileen waxes poetic about all of some of these specific sexual partners, and she says that her sexual discovery gave her a sense of purity and exaltation that she was able to transfer to her poetry.

Pages 238 – 251: Eileen discusses how her newfound lesbian identity began to translate into her general social life. As she embraced her sexual orientation, it began to positively affect her performance and outlook at public events like poetry readings, and she found herself surrounded by different types of people. She became more open and public about her sexual orientation, and although she feared some type of social backlash, she experienced very little of it. Eileen then mentions two other gay poets whom she admired: Michael Lally and Hart Crane. Michael Lally was a successful contemporary of Eileen’s, but Hart Crane died in the 1930s. Eileen says that Crane’s poetry perfectly encapsulates the difficulties of identity that being gay presents.

Pages 252 – 258: Eileen recalls meeting poet Rene Ricard at a special exhibit at the Museum of Modern Art. She and Rene discussed the positive and negative aspects of being gay, and then they went back to Eileen’s apartment to converse. Eileen describes Rene as very excited, interesting, and interested in everything. Eileen characterizes Rene as a living counterpart to Hart Crane, giving her guidance about living and creating art as someone who is not heterosexual. Eileen says that she and Rene became good friends and that they maintained their friendship over many years. Eileen and Rene went to many social events and artistic gatherings together, where they met many artists who were either well known at the time or would become quite well known in the future.

Pages 259 – 270: Eileen closes the novel with a discussion of her personal and artistic lives and the semblance of stability that she ultimately achieves in both her personal and artistic lives. Regarding the intersection of these lives, Eileen comments, “The place I found was carved out of sadness and sex, and to write a poem there you merely needed to gather” (260). She implies with this statement that her hardships serve to strengthen her personally and enrich her art. She says that her process of coming to



know herself and her artistic voice was fairly protracted, but that in the end, all random exploration culminated in useful results, just like the random exploration that a poem is able to achieve. Eileen ends the book with an uplifting thought on the power of self-discovery: “You can actually learn to have grace. And that’s heaven” (270).

Analysis

The chapter entitled “Friday,” which begins on page 222, seems rather abstract and isolated from the rest of the novel, but it serves several significant functions with regards to the tone and themes of the novel. Firstly, it serves as a creative mechanism for conveying a narrative point of view that is not directed through Eileen’s personal experiences. The humorous and creative narrative device that the fish embody serves to give a perspective directed towards Eileen rather than directed out from Eileen towards the people and things around her. The fish view Eileen as somewhat isolated and lonely, and their comments on life and relationships—while rather humorous in their profundity coming from fish—serve to illustrate various abstract and melancholy observations about Eileen’s life that may be more difficult to articulate in Eileen’s own narrative voice without sounding awkward or overly serious and self-deprecating.

The figure of Rose is further developed in this section as something akin to a heavenly conduit for Eileen’s journey of sexual self-discovery. Eileen uses highly poetic and idyllic language to describe her sexual experiences with Rose and the other sexual partners that follow. However, this poetic language is combined with very blunt and direct descriptions of the anatomy of Eileen’s sexual partners, thus juxtaposing the mundaneness of these sexual encounters with the profound effect they had on Eileen at the time. Eileen and Rose did not have a prolonged romantic relationship beyond their relatively brief stint as sexual partners, and this serves to heighten the significance of their time together. This section of the novel focuses on some abstract heavenly ascent, and Eileen’s time spent with Rose appears to be one of the major factors in consecrating that ascent by giving Eileen a deep sense of pleasure and fulfillment that she had not experienced before.

The figures of Michael Lally, Hart Crane, and Rene Ricard are also significant figures in Eileen’s journey to personal fulfillment, as they serve to give her valuable guidance and inspiration after she comes to terms with her sexual orientation. In their roles as guides and mentors, these three figures seem to share a parallel with Virgil, the Roman poet who serves as Dante’s guide in the *Divine Comedy*. However, each of these three men serve slightly different roles as guides. Hart Crane provides the sense of a kindred spirit through his poetry, Michael Lally provides inspiration through his professional and artistic successes, and Rene acts as a close friend and companion.

As the final section of the novel comes to a close, it appears that Eileen values self-knowledge and personal fulfillment even above professional and artistic success. The middle section of the novel corresponded with Dante’s “Purgatorio” and concerned Eileen’s professional life, while the final section of the novel corresponded with Dante’s “Paradiso” and largely concerned Eileen’s personal life. By this juxtaposition, the



narrative creates a hierarchy of needs, with personal fulfillment shown as more important than professional fulfillment, although Eileen still seems to view professional fulfillment as valuable, and the two types of fulfillment appear to be connected in Eileen's life by the practice of poetry and other art forms.

Discussion Question 1

What function does Rose serve in the narrative? How does Eileen characterize her relationship with Rose and the importance of that relationship?

Discussion Question 2

What significances do the figures of Hart Crane and Rene Ricard hold? How do Eileen's relationships with them compare and contrast with each other?

Discussion Question 3

What lessons and morals does Eileen appear to put forth in the final chapter of the novel? How does Eileen's character arc throughout the novel appear to culminate by the end of the narrative?

Vocabulary

mead, collude, puerile, communion, abjure, finesse, villanelle, rhetorician, seclusion, obscure, ventriloquize, pinnacle, tautology, cryptic, parched, tumult, depraved, composure, vanguard, disseminate, retrospective



Characters

Eileen

Eileen is a fictionalized version of the author. Eileen is originally from the Boston neighborhood of Arlington, and after college she moves to New York City to pursue a career in poetry. Throughout the novel, Eileen struggles with relationships and with her own sexuality. After moving to New York, Eileen slowly realizes that she is a lesbian, and she begins to pursue relationship with women instead of with men. Eileen is fiercely passionate about poetry and performance as art forms, and after years of artistic and financial struggle, she is able to make a living mostly from her artwork. She is closely associated with the St. Mark's Poetry Project in New York City, and she serves as the director of that program from 1984 to 1987.

Eva Nelson

Eva Nelson is one of Eileen's English professors at the University of Massachusetts Boston. Eileen finds Mrs. Nelson sexually attractive as well as very inspiring as a teacher. When teaching the text of Dante's *Inferno*, Mrs. Nelson assigns the class to write their own piece based on the text. This assignment helps contribute to Eileen's interest in poetry, and it also helps inspire the format of the novel, which bases its form on Dante's *Divine Comedy*.

Rita

Rita is a young woman whom Eileen meets in New York City. At the time of their meeting, Eileen is 25 years old, and Rita is about 22. At this time, Rita has recently moved to New York City, and she has been making a living by having sex with wealthy older men in exchange for money. Rita meets Eileen at a bar under the pretense of a shared interest in poetry. However, Rita's real motive is to recruit Eileen for a double date with two Italian businessmen.

Attilio Viola

Attilio Viola is an Italian businessman who visits New York City on a business trip. Eileen goes on a double date with Rita, Attilio, and Attilio's unnamed business partner. Eileen goes on the date with the assumption that she will be paid by Attilio if she has sex with him. After dinner and drinks, Eileen and Attilio go to Attilio's hotel room and sleep together. However, Attilio does not pay Eileen any money, and Eileen is unable to bring herself to ask for any.



Paul Blackburn

Paul Blackburn was a real-life American poet who is repeatedly mentioned in the novel. Although Paul Blackburn does not make appearances in any of the scenes of the novel, his personality and reputation have a significant effect on the atmosphere and characters of the novel. Paul Blackburn stands as one of the major artistic influences of the New York City poetry scene that Eileen inhabits, and he founded the St. Mark's Poetry Project, an organization with which Eileen becomes very involved.

Patti Smith

Patti Smith is a real-life poet and musician who appears several times in the novel. Patti Smith stands as a major artistic influence on the New York City music and poetry scene, and she runs in similar social and artistic circles as Eileen. Eileen mentions attending several Patti Smith performances, and she characterizes Smith as highly talented. To Eileen, Patti Smith represents a unique talent among the artists of New York City, possessing the ability to perform with an acute sense of passion and intimacy. Patti Smith stands as a strong example of the many famous artists with whom Eileen became acquainted as an active participant in the New York City arts scene.

Eden O'Malley

Eden O'Malley is a successful artist and resident of New York City. She is the wife of Cato O'Malley, another successful New York artist. Eden takes an interest in Eileen's artistic works and helps to support Eileen for periods of time while Eileen composes new poems. For a few months, Eden lets Eileen live in a house she owns in Belfast, and at a different time, she lets Eileen live in a house she owns in Pennsylvania. Eden represents a very financially lucrative side of the art world, greatly contrasting with Eileen's chronic financial struggles.

Kathy Acker

Kathy Acker was a real-life New York poet and a friend of Eileen. Kathy was a poet and novelist who often wrote about themes of sex and feminism. Kathy and Eileen experience some friction in their friendship due to various artistic and personality differences. At a poetry reading in Germany, Eileen becomes very upset with Kathy for inadvertently distracting the audience while Eileen was performing a poem. Despite areas of friction, Eileen and Kathy remain friends.

Rose Lomak

Rose Lomak is the first woman with whom Eileen ever had a sexual relationship. After moving to New York City, Eileen begins to realize that she is in fact a lesbian, and Rose



plays an integral role in helping Eileen explore her true sexual identity. Eileen's relationship with Rose is short-lived, but it leads to a series of subsequent sexual relationships with women soon after Rose and Eileen's relationship ends. Rose is thus portrayed as an integral figure in Eileen's sexual self-discovery. Rose is also the name of the dog that Eileen adopts many years after her relationship with Rose, but it is unclear whether or not this is meant as a gesture of commemoration or is simply a coincidence.

Allen Ginsburg

Allen Ginsberg was a real-life American poet and one of the foremost artists of the American beat poetry movement. Ginsberg is mentioned several times throughout the novel as an important influence on the artists of New York City and America in general. One of the major anecdotes in the novel involves Allen Ginsberg contacting President Bill Clinton a week before Ginsberg's death. Ginsberg begs to receive a national award, as he has never received any major recognition for his work. The anecdote helps to illustrate the potentially unhealthy desire for recognition that pervades the art world.

Alice

Alice is a friend of Eileen's whom Eileen first meets in New York City. In the narrative, Eileen functions as a type of guide for Eileen's journey of artistic and personal self-discovery. Eileen has not yet come to terms with her homosexuality when she first meets Alice, but she finds that she has a latent crush on Alice. Furthermore, Alice is a poet and a teacher who acts as an artistic mentor for Eileen. Although Eileen and Alice never form a relationship beyond this, Alice is presented as an important figure in Eileen's journey of self-discovery.

Rene Ricard

Rene Ricard is a real-life American poet whom Eileen befriends in New York City. Eileen and Rene meet at an exhibit at the Museum of Modern Art, and they soon become good friends. Like Eileen, Rene is gay, and Eileen happens to first meet Rene not long after Eileen has come to terms with her own homosexuality. Eileen characterizes her relationship with Rene as one of great mutual support. She states that Rene is of great help in guiding her as she explores her life and its changes in the wake of coming to terms with her homosexuality.

Symbols and Symbolism

Poetry

Throughout the narrative, poetry symbolizes truth, beauty, and positive activism. Eileen's central passion is poetry, and Eileen often discusses why it is so important to her. To Eileen, poetry seems to represent a true art form, where the artists are concerned only with discovering truth and beauty and furthering positive political causes rather than pursuing the art for things like money or fame. Eileen sees poetry as something magical and visceral, and she finds deep emotional fulfillment in being able to use the art form as a way of capturing her various feelings. Poetry is never described as a destructive force, but rather a pure form of expression that allows Eileen to fully realize her personal and artistic identities.

Dante's Divine Comedy

Dante Alighieri's *Divine Comedy* symbolizes the function of art as a way of viewing and interpreting the world around oneself. In college, Mrs. Nelson assigns the class to read the first part of the *Divine Comedy*, which is entitled *Inferno*. Mrs. Nelson then assigns the class to write their own piece inspired by *Inferno* and how it views and interprets the time in which Dante Alighieri lived. Mrs. Nelson tells the class that their own pieces should be artistic interpretations of the students' own worlds. In some ways, the novel itself is inspired by this assignment, as it seeks to interpret Eileen's life. The novel is also roughly formatted to mirror the three parts of the *Divine Comedy*: *Inferno*, *Purgatorio*, and *Paradiso*.

St. Mark's Poetry Project

In the novel, the St. Mark's Poetry Project symbolizes shared goals and community support. The St. Mark's Poetry Project is a poetry venue that was founded in 1966. After Eileen moves to New York, she becomes very involved in the poetry community at St. Mark's, and she even becomes the director of the venue for a limited period of time. Throughout the novel, Eileen repeatedly refers to St. Mark's as a place where she was able to grow as an artist. St. Mark's serves as Eileen's artistic home, and through the support of the other poets at St. Mark's, she is able to maintain her enthusiasm for the art form.

Money

Money symbolizes a false goal that distracts from true artistic intentions. As an artist in New York City, Eileen displays no desire for money beyond its necessity to support her while she pursues her artwork. In her twenties, when Eileen is a struggling and obscure artist, Eileen does not work more than is necessary to pay for her food, rent, and other



essentials. She experiments with just how much money she needs at a given time so that she is able to work as little as possible and spend as much time as possible working on her art. Then, later in life, Eileen is proud to be making most of her money from her art, as it means she is able to spend even more time focusing on her artwork. Thus, Eileen and the narrative treat money not as a goal, but simply as something on which one should not focus more than is necessary.

Television

Television is used as a symbol for all art that is devoid of truth or beauty or any real artistic value. In Eileen's mind, television is an art form that exists only as a commercial medium. The goal of television is simply to create the largest possible audience to whom brands may sell their products. In this way, television is meant to represent the antithesis of poetry. Television represents the desire for fame and money, while poetry represents the result of true artistic intentions. Eileen sometimes worries that poetry, either written by herself or other poets, is becoming similar to television in that it is becoming more focused on pleasing a wide audience instead of focusing on truth and raw emotion. Eileen fights constantly to make sure that her own work does not become like television in that way.

Sex and Sexuality

Sex and sexuality symbolize the development of Eileen's own personal identity. As Eileen moves to New York and begins to explore her identity and personal desires through poetry, she becomes increasingly aware of her sexual orientation. Eileen soon realizes that she is a lesbian, and Eileen's process of realizing and exploring her sexuality is deeply connected to the process of simply exploring her own identity. Eileen often mentions throughout the novel that being a lesbian is an important part of her identity, but that she did not fully realize this part of herself until after she became involved in the poetry scene in New York City. Eileen's process of coming out as a gay woman is therefore highly symbolic of her self-discovery in the New York poetry scene.

Joan of Arc

Joan of Arc is used as a symbol of feminism and the power of feminist activism through artistic endeavors. Eileen writes and directs a performance piece about Joan of Arc, a famous female French soldier from the 15th century. The performance piece deals with themes of feminism and feminist strength. The piece turns out to be somewhat of a difficult undertaking, as not all of the actors appear to be as enthusiastic about the piece as Eileen. However, Eileen is able to summon her own enthusiasm and use it to inspire the performers. In this way, the production of this performance appears to represent Eileen's difficult but tireless work regarding advocacy for feminist issues and causes.



The Kennedy Family

The Kennedy family represents mainstream American values of commercialism, political power, and financial success. The Kennedy family is a rich and influential family from Massachusetts, whose members include President John Kennedy, Senator Robert Kennedy, and Senator Ted Kennedy. In a poem by Eileen called “An American Poem,” Eileen writes from the point of view of a fictional member of the Kennedy family who runs away to live in New York City and pursue the life of a poor and obscure poet. Eileen uses this poem to contrast mainstream American values with her own personal values and demonstrate how her own values are just as valid if not more so than mainstream ones.

Purgatory

The narrative uses the idea of purgatory to symbolize the work and effort necessary to rise above one’s circumstances and achieve a sense of personal and professional fulfillment. In Eileen’s personal story, purgatory represents Eileen’s tireless work with regards to writing poetry, performing, and being involved in the New York poetry scene in order to meet her own artistic and career-related goals. The narrative represents heaven as the state of being fulfilled in one’s life, both in terms of one’s work and one’s love life. Thus, from the purgatory of artistic development and personal exploration, Eileen is able to reach the heaven of professional recognition and personal fulfillment through her various romantic relationships.

The National Endowment for the Arts

In the novel, the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) symbolizes the social, political, and economic realities in which a person abides in order to support oneself and be able to make art. The National Endowment for the Arts was established in the 1960s as an independent agency of the United States federal government. The function of the NEA is to fund various artistic endeavors throughout the country, but it receives varying amounts of funding based on how much a given governmental administration seems to value the arts. In this way, the NEA seems to present a barometer for how much value the United States places on the arts at any given time. Eileen occasionally refers to the NEA in this capacity, and in doing so, she recognizes that there are certain economic realities which an artist must face and struggle with in order to keep pursuing art.

Settings

Boston

Boston is the capital and most populous city of the state of Massachusetts. As a college student, Eileen attends the University of Massachusetts Boston and studies in the English and creative writing programs there. Eileen develops a crush on one of her professors, Eva Nelson. Eileen describes Boston as a city somewhat lacking in its own identity. Instead functioning more as a place for outsiders to visit rather than a place for people to call home. After Eileen moves to New York, she often thinks about Boston and how it differs from New York City.

Arlington

Arlington is a town located northwest of Boston. Before going to college, Eileen lives and attends Catholic schools in Arlington. She resides there with her working-class family. While attending college, Eileen commutes to school from her apartment in Arlington. Eileen's Catholic education and working-class family play major roles in her early development, and Eileen often comments on how these factors contributed to her relationship to art and life in general as she grew up and pursued an artistic career in New York City.

New York City

New York City is the most populous city in the United States. After Eileen graduates from college, she moves to New York City to pursue her passion of writing poetry. Eileen becomes deeply involved in the New York City arts scene and meets many other poets and artists. She briefly attends Queens College for graduated school, but she drops out not long after enrolling. For a limited period of time, Eileen becomes the director of the St. Mark's Poetry Project, which is located in New York City. The vast majority of the novel takes in New York City, as that is where Eileen spends most of her time over the course of her life.

Milton

Milton is a small town in upstate New York. Eileen makes a trip to Milton in an attempt to spend some time working on a farm. She hopes the experience will expand her horizons and give her something to write about. She attempts to find a job picking fruit, but the work pays very little, and her lodgings turn out to be quite expensive in addition to the rent she pays for her apartment in New York City. In the end, Eileen is forced to simply return to New York City.

Belfast

Belfast is the capital of Northern Ireland. Eden O'Malley, a successful artist who admires Eileen's work, lets Eileen stay at the home in Belfast that Eden co-owns with her husband. In Belfast, Eileen spends much of her time reading, writing, and exploring the nearby woods with Rose, her dog. Eileen stays there for a few months and finds the experience very relaxing and productive. However, the experience does make her somewhat more conscious of the economic divide between her and Eden O'Malley.

Themes and Motifs

Art

Throughout the novel, Eileen's passion for art is portrayed as one of the defining factors in her life. Most of the major life decisions that Eileen makes are based on her pursuit of artistic fulfillment. For example, Eileen decided to move to New York from Boston after realizing that poetry was one of the most important things to her and that New York would be the best place to practice her craft. Once in New York, most of Eileen's activities were determined by her continued attraction to art and the communities that support artistic pursuits. She went to graduate school to study poetry, and then after she dropped out of that program, she sought out other artistic communities in the city. One major example of this would be the St. Mark's Poetry Project, with which she would soon become involved and eventually serve as the artistic director for several years.

These actions of Eileen's were all in service to the idea that she could eventually make a career out of her artistic passions, and she was eventually able to do so, thus becoming an important figure in the New York arts scene and exercising significant influence. This success seemingly validated Eileen's committed pursuit of art, as critics and fellow artists praised her work as beautiful and often politically relevant. Her artistic success also opened up new opportunities for her and allowed her to spend even more time doing what she loved. Eileen was able to travel to many distant places to do research or poetry readings, and she made many valuable connections in the art world, such as with Eden O'Malley, Rene Ricard, and many other respected artists.

In the novel, art is portrayed not simply as a tool for entertainment, but as something with many diverse and vitally important uses for the enrichment of human life. To Eileen, poetry and theater help to convey new thoughts and ideas to readers and audiences, but art is also portrayed as being equally important to the artist herself. Poetry helps Eileen articulate her thoughts and feelings to herself as much as to readers and audiences. Eileen characterizes poetry as a way of making connections between seemingly disparate ideas, moving freely between thoughts and subjects, and thus Eileen claims that poetry is a very important tool for self-exploration. Throughout her life, poetry and performance help Eileen to discover deep truths about herself and reaffirm those discoveries by proclaiming them to readers and audiences.

Sex and Sexuality

Eileen spends a lot of time in the novel discussing sex and her sexual orientation, positioning these parts of her life as highly significant to her sense of self and her view of the world. Eileen's sexuality parallels her love of poetry, as they are both portrayed as integral character traits that Eileen cannot control, only embrace as part of herself. Thus, Eileen's sexuality serves as one of several lenses through which Eileen views the world. Just as Eileen uses her art and poetry to view and interpret the world around her,



she uses her sexuality in a similar way. Specifically, she views sexuality and sexual orientation as important markers in navigating social and artistic circles. Eileen's identity as a lesbian seems to define her in her professional and artistic lives, and both her work and her social interactions are colored by that identity.

Eileen's sexuality and sexual orientation also play a major role in how she connects to other and forms meaningful relationships, both in romantic and platonic ways. Eileen's sexual and romantic relationships provide a source of great fulfillment for Eileen, allowing her to feel more grounded and connected in the world. Even before Eileen comes to terms with her homosexuality, she finds a certain amount of comfort and fulfillment in her relationships with men. Then, once Eileen does come out as gay, she finds a great amount of pleasure and comfort in her relationships with women. Eileen even finds great comfort in her platonic relationships with other homosexual poets. Eileen characterizes her friendships with gay poets Rene Ricard and Michael Lally as very important to providing a sense of stability in the time soon after she comes to term with her sexuality.

Additionally, the story arc of Eileen coming to terms with her true sexual orientation symbolizes a greater arc of self-discovery as connected with art, poetry, and other facets of Eileen's life. In the novel, poetry often serves as an important tool of self-exploration for Eileen, allowing her to freely explore her thoughts and ideas. Thus, poetry seems to serve as an important factor in Eileen's discovery of her sexuality and other personal traits. It is also important to note that Eileen does not come to terms with her sexuality until she moves to New York, thus indicating that Eileen's environment also plays an important role in her story of self-discovery. After moving to New York and becoming involved in the arts scene there, Eileen is able to come to terms with her sexuality, thus symbolizing how these events help her to discover her true self in many other ways as well.

Money

Although Eileen is never portrayed as a person of great wealth, money appears to play a major role in her life and how she views the world. In fact, it may be directly because of Eileen's financial situation that she often alludes to the significance of money in both her life and the lives of others. For example, as a struggling artist in her twenties, Eileen found that she maintained a various financial situation when living in New York. In fact, Eileen even embraced this precariousness as a necessity of the artistic lifestyle. Eileen viewed her willingness to live cheaply as a virtue of her commitment to her artistic passions. Eileen often only worked just enough to get by and spent the rest of her time either working on her art or socializing with other artists in the city. Thus, Eileen seemed to view money not as something to value or pursue, but as something to simply account for as efficiently as possible so that one could focus on pursuits that were actually worthwhile.

This view of Eileen's evolves somewhat over the course of the novel, as money often serves as a useful tool for artistic pursuits. For example, Eileen received several grants



that helped fund her art and research. One such grant was from the National Endowment for the Arts, which funded a theater piece of Eileen's called "Modern Art." The money from this grant helped to support Eileen and pay for actors, costumes, a performance space, and other necessities. Moreover, Eileen was able to travel to Italy and visit the grave of Dante Alighieri thanks to money from a travel grant she was awarded. Eileen enjoyed certain benefits from the support of wealthy artist Eden O'Malley, who allowed Eileen to stay in her houses in Ireland and Pennsylvania while she read books and worked on new writings. Thus, while Eileen does not value money in and of itself, she does value it as an occasional tool for the support of artistic works.

However, Eileen remains aware of the dangers of money and the ways in which it can divide people and negatively warp a person's worldview. Eileen is always very aware of socio-economic distinctions between people, and she sees it as division that causes unnecessary separations between people. For example, she addressed this idea in her famous poem entitled "An American Poem," where she wrote from the perspective of a fictional member of the Kennedy family who forsook her family fortune to live as a struggling poet in New York. In this way, Eileen valorized those who do not value money but instead value inner fulfillment and personal connection. Eileen also noticed the caustic effects of money when she stayed at Eden O'Malley's house in Pennsylvania. There, she felt as if the wealthy neighbors looked down upon her due to her economic situation, and she felt as if there was harmful an unnecessary distance between herself and those people.

Feminism

The novel often addresses the intersection of gender and politics as an important issue, and it creates a close juxtaposition between this issue and the art that is so often used to explore and promote it. In the novel, this intersection is most often referred to with the label of feminism, which is the socio-political idea that women are disadvantaged by society and must fight back against certain patriarchal forces in order to gain equal rights with men. Eileen and her fellow artists view feminist politics as a very urgent and important issue in both America and the world at large, and they seek to promote feminist ideals through their art. As a woman, Eileen appears to value associations with other female artists who share her feminist ideals, and thus her artistic community is one highly defined by the promotion of women's issues. Thus, the narrative and themes of the novel are highly influenced by the socio-political goals of these women with whom Eileen spends so much time.

Just as Eileen explores and presents her own ideas of feminism through her artwork, the novel explores Eileen's ideas of feminism by describing these artistic projects to the reader. Three significant examples of this include Eileen's performance piece about Joan of Arc, her theatrical production entitled "Modern Art," and her collaborative literary project called "Ladies Museum." Each of these pieces helps present different insights as to Eileen's views of feminism. The Joan of Arc piece helps to establish Eileen's devotion to promoting the value of women's endeavors, "Modern Art," illustrates the many hardships and instances of alienation that women must face, and "Ladies Museum"



presents the idea that Eileen's feminist views often take on shocking, almost flippant characteristics and do not always align with other feminists' views. These descriptions of Eileen's feminist artworks help not only to explore Eileen's views of feminism, but also to explore the idea of feminism in general.

Moreover, the novel itself functions, at least in part, as a piece of feminist art. The novel focuses on female perspectives and experiences, including that of Eileen and the women around her. Eileen's personal experiences serve to promote ideas of feminism by illustrating very hardships and struggles unique to women. In addition, Eileen's accomplishments serve to highlight various virtues that Eileen describes as unique to women. For example, Eileen examines how women's penchant for creating narrative within their own lives is useful for the creation of artistic narratives. Where men are so often satisfied simply with results or goals, women's focus on the journeys that lead to those goals helps to inform important artistic modes and choices. Eileen herself serves as a feminist inspiration for overcoming many struggles and refusing to give up on her passions. In the end, Eileen attains a position of renown in the arts world, and she remains committed to feminist ideals along the way.

Relationships

Over the course of the novel, Eileen forms many different interpersonal relationships of many different types and characteristics, and these relationships are integral to helping her form her own identity and find her way to personal fulfillment. One type of relationship that significantly influences Eileen is her family relationships. Eileen does not often speak very explicitly about her family relationships in the novel, but they do hold a place of certain significance in her life. Eileen's parents both come from a working-class background, and thus Eileen identifies strongly with the lives and struggles of working-class Americans. Eileen's childhood in a working-class family distinctly influences Eileen's personal and artistic philosophies, as well as her ideas of money and economics. Her parents also represent Eileen's origins in the sense of both geography and lifestyle. Eileen's relocation from New York to Boston is in part a deliberate degree of separation between Eileen and her parents, but her parents still exert a type of passive influence over Eileen, such as when Eileen's father died and seemed to cause a significant emotional disturbance within Eileen.

Eileen is also greatly influenced by her romantic relationships throughout her life, both before and after Eileen came out as gay. During Eileen's teenage years in Boston and her early years in New York, she formed various relationships with men, and although they were not nearly as fulfilling as relationships she later formed with women, they still significantly affected how Eileen views that part of her life. Although Eileen eventually realized she was a lesbian, these early relationships with men appeared to function as Eileen's introduction to the idea of romance. Then once Eileen came to terms with her sexuality, her relationships with women served to deepen Eileen's connection to herself and the world around her. She gained a great sense of leisure and comfort from these relationships, but she also appeared to gain a greater sense of herself and how she was able to connect with others.

Eileen is also greatly influenced by the platonic friendships she forms over the years, as they serve the function of long-term support and stability. While Eileen's romantic relationships were often short-lived, her friendships were sustained for very long periods of time because they did not rely on the sexual needs and pressures of her romantic relationships. Thus, Eileen is able to gain long-term benefits from her friendships with fellow artists like Kathy Acker and Rene Ricard. Because Eileen's romantic relationships are always relatively brief, Eileen is usually only able to discuss those relationships in terms of the general concept of romance, but because her friendships are sustained for much longer periods of time, she is able to discuss individual friendships and the distinct ways in which they each help to support her and to help her develop as a person.



Styles

Point of View

The novel is told almost entirely from the perspective of Eileen, a fictionalized version of the author, poet Eileen Myles. However, although the book is a novel and thus technically a work of fiction, the personal anecdotes about which Eileen writes appear to be largely based in truth. Therefore, one could argue that the novel is really a creative memoir and that the true perspective of the novel is that of the author herself. Thus, this autobiographical perspective is given certain creative license by the creative format in which the author is working. This allows the author to present the reader with her personal thoughts and experiences in a creative and free-flowing fashion. The experiences of the character Eileen are intermixed with observation, opinion, thoughts, and feelings. This also allows the narrative to reflect Eileen's creative tendencies and chaotic lifestyle within the presentation of the novel itself. Like poetry, the prose often leaps about to seemingly disparate ideas, thus infusing the narrative with the creative and chaotic sensibilities which Eileen seems to treasure and to repeatedly discover within her own life and personal experiences.

The novel is told in the past tense and with first-person narration, as if Eileen were speaking directly to the reader about her important life experiences and the wisdom she gained from them. This narrative mode gives the novel a perspective of reflection, allowing both Eileen and the reader to process and interpret Eileen's past actions, thoughts, feelings, challenges, and personal changes. In turn, this appears to put the reader in the position of a close confidant of Eileen's. The reader is allowed very intimate insight into Eileen's past. Simultaneously, the vivid emotional descriptions that the narration employs function to place the reader in the reader in each moment as it is recalled and described by the narration. This creates a greater sense of intimacy between the reader and the narrator, helping to overcome possible disparities between the life experiences of the reader and Eileen.

Language and Meaning

The language of the novel appears to be heavily influenced by poetic forms and patterns, thus mirroring the passion for poetry that follows Eileen throughout her life. Eileen utilizes poetry as a way of exploring oneself, promoting social and political causes, and drawing connections between seemingly disparate ideas. Thus, the prose of the novel will often use experimental constructions and poetic language to describe Eileen's experiences and create unexpected juxtapositions. Although the narration usually surrounds a general event or theme in each chapter, the paragraphs and individual sentences often move quickly between seemingly disparate thoughts or events. This mirrors Eileen's view of poetry and also serves to give an artistic and impressionistic sense of Eileen's life, presenting seemingly unrelated details that then come together in support of a theme. The prose also mirrors the function of poetry as



self-exploration, self-expression, and sociopolitical advocacy, as the themes and subjects of the various chapters usually pertain to Eileen's personal life, her inner thoughts, and her social and political agendas.

The creative nature of the prose also helps to give the novel a very flexible and highly dynamic tone. While discussing her life, Eileen often moves very quickly between humor, poignancy, frustration, joy, and many other emotional modes. In doing so, the prose serves to capture the many different emotional states of Eileen's often irregular and unpredictable life. Eileen as a character appears highly drawn to unorthodox and energetic situations, and these situations often lead to a wide array of emotional responses in Eileen both at the time and when she looks back on the events. Overall, the tone of the novel appears to be generally hopeful and optimistic, as Eileen portrays her various struggles and moments of confusion as necessary to her overall personal and artistic development. The fact that the novel is portrayed as a retrospective lends to the tone of hope, as Eileen appears to reach a very comfortable and stable state by the end of the novel, thus justifying the struggles that were necessary to reach that place.

Structure

Inferno: A Poet's Novel is structured as a series of personal anecdotes told in a generally nonlinear fashion. The anecdotes are not ordered based on chronological order such as they are grouped by theme and subject, and even then this construction is only loosely followed. The first section of the novel mostly concerns Eileen's early years in New York as she began to establish her independence and find her artistic voice. The second section of the novel mostly concerns Eileen's actual career as a poet, which became more substantial in her 30's and 40's. The final section of the novel again mostly focuses on Eileen's early years in New York, but this time concentrating on her journeys of sexual, artistic, and personal self-discovery. Within each section, the novel is divided into chapters labeled with titles rather than numbers. Each chapter is relatively short and focuses on a different anecdote or thematic observation from Eileen's life.

The novel's structure is partially inspired by the three sections of the *Divine Comedy* by Dante Alighieri. These sections are entitled "Inferno," "Purgatorio," and "Paradiso." In the *Divine Comedy*, the poet Dante takes a tour through hell, purgatory, and heaven. In *Inferno: A Poet's Novel*, Eileen, a poet, also writes about journeys that she takes, although the journeys she writes about appear to be far more personal and based in her actual life. The ways in which her novel's sections align with the sections of the *Divine Comedy* help to inform the functions of each section in Eileen Myles' novel. The first section of the novel portrays a type of Inferno by focusing on the many hardships, struggles, and shameful moments of Eileen's younger years. The second section illustrates a type of purgatory in that she is able to work towards a more fulfilled and stable state in her life. The third section shares parallels with the idea of heaven in that it contains reflections upon how Eileen attained a state of personal grace and comfort.



Quotes

I loved how in college you could just do nothing. You didn't have to decide you were a poet or a whore or anything.

-- Eileen ("in and out")

Importance: This quotation helps to establish the idea of identity and Eileen's relationship to it. Much of the novel is about Eileen's journey of self-realization, and this quotation helps to establish the idea that that journey began in earnest after she left college and moved to New York. Eileen then spends her twenties in New York working towards discovering and developing her own identity.

A person's ability to arrive in some comfortable state with both cities has a lot to do with money. Not necessarily having it, but having a good relationship with it.

-- Eileen ("in and out")

Importance: This quotation reflects the theme of money, which recurs throughout the novel. Eileen often states, such as in this quotation, how money can have a significant effect on one's experience and sense of ease in the world. Eileen is never very wealthy, but she does make acquaintances with wealthy art patrons such as Eden O'Malley, and these relationships help to further develop her awareness of how money can affect one's relationship with the world.

There's no mystery why poetry is so elaborately practiced by the young. The material of poems is energy itself, not even language.

-- Eileen ("habit")

Importance: This quotation helps define Eileen's view of poetry and her attraction to it. She appears to view poetry as something that actually transcends language and captures a person's energy. This energy could be interpreted in a number of ways, such as excitement, emotional energy, or even passion for a specific cause. In Eileen's younger years, poetry seems to be a way of expressing her youthful energy, thus cementing her lifelong interest in the art form.

He was an American kind of phony. There are many kinds of fakery, and some are successful.

-- Eileen ("readings")

Importance: In exploration of the idea of identity, this quotation puts forth the idea that the performance of an identity may actually be a successful substitute for an identity that is naturally cultivated from within. This quotation discusses a poet named Ron Padgett, and Eileen sees him as assuming a chosen identity. While she thinks Ron's affected identity is valid, she sees her own identity as truly her own, and her artistic performance are a reflection of that identity, as opposed her identity being formed by the performances themselves.



Voluntarily the artist becomes poor and in that poverty she will begin to live in another time...The dirt of authenticity is now on her, and the good training is on the inside.

-- Eileen ("Marge Piercy")

Importance: This passage is part of a series of statements about what an artist is generally believed to be like. The passage partially affirms and partially satirizes these views. This quotation is significant in that it seems to reflect Eileen's own career trajectory. She is born into a working-class family and generally lives in poverty as a struggling artist, but she slowly gains legitimacy in part due to the experiences that her lifestyle grants her.

In relationships I spend a lot of time waiting for it to end. There's the happy sex part and then there's the waiting for the end.

-- Eileen ("Modern Art")

Importance: This quotation appears to provide an accurate representation of Eileen's love life as it is portrayed throughout the novel. Eileen's relationships appear to be quite numerous and usually fairly brief. Eileen does not appear to see romantic love as a source of long-term stability, but rather as a way to further explore herself and the world around her. Therefore, once she feels that she has obtained all that she can from a relationship, it usually comes to an end soon after that.

How dare he. Sex is political. Feminist politics are political.

-- Kathy Acker ("Coda")

Importance: Kathy Acker says these things to an audience member at a poetry reading who proclaims that the night's poetry was all about sex and had nothing to do with politics. Kathy's response helps to develop an important recurring theme in the book, which is the importance of sex beyond the idea of simple pleasure. As devoted feminists, Eileen and her friends believe that sex and sexuality are important parts of people's identities, and therefore they are important aspects of many different political issues and discussions.

I was thinking today that I have spent my whole life trying to be a man...I think I was examining my behavior (as wrong) and imagining how some man would do it.

-- Eileen ("Heaven")

Importance: This quotation addresses an important issue of gender with which Eileen struggles. Eileen never questions her gender, as she is always firmly confident in her identity as a woman. However, she often feels motivated by various misogynistic standards to think of men as inherently superior. Therefore, as she states in this quotation, she often thinks about how a man would approach a problem. At the same time, Eileen firmly rejects ideas that men are superior and consciously works against such ideas.

A man will always shake his meat as a picture. A woman prefers a story, a growing possibility, an imagined line.



-- Eileen ("reading and eating")

Importance: This quotation addresses an important intersection between gender, sexuality, and artistic sensibilities. Eileen defends the artistic capabilities of the female gender by pointing out that human sexuality is connected to artistic sensibilities. Thus, while a man is often satisfied with something simple and stagnant, a woman prefers something more complex and dynamic, both in the sphere of sex and of art.

Twisted by the love of things irreconcilable. That was it. That was being gay for me.
-- Eileen ("hart!")

Importance: The first sentence is a line from a poem by Hart Crane, and the rest of the quotation is Eileen's response. Eileen demonstrates a great affinity for the poetry of Hart Crane, partially because he is gay and a poet like her. The Hart Crane quotation above, which she says accurately reflects her experience of being gay, reveals the difficult and complex nature of coming to terms with that identity. Both Crane and Eileen grew up in a time where being gay was not as tolerated as it is today, and so it causes great struggle within them in coming to terms with being gay.

It was hard not to die now, to take the easy way out and actually be dead, but instead I saw it was a time to...consider existence and writing poetry as a matter of devotion, an expression of desire.
-- Eileen ("moving")

Importance: This quotation helps further explore Eileen's relationship with the world and with poetry. Poetry is described here as a method by which Eileen renews her devotion to both life and art. In this way, poetry is characterized as not only a form of personal expression, but also a way in which to further fuel one's personal motivation, in turn creating further fodder for artistic expression. This quotation thusly reveals the cyclical nature of life's relationship with poetry, as viewed by Eileen.

Though, sometimes, even if you said too much, you can still go back and fix it. You can actually learn to have grace, and that's heaven.
-- Eileen ("moving")

Importance: This quotation concludes the novel and helps to complete the novel's parallel structure to Dante's Divine Comedy. The reference to heaven alludes to the end of the Divine Comedy when Dante ascends to heaven/. In this quotation, Eileen proclaims to have found her own heaven in the idea that one can develop their own being and identity into something graceful and fulfilling.