Ironweed Study Guide

Ironweed by William Kennedy

BOOKRAGS

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Plot Summary

Ironweed is the remarkable story of Francis Phelan, once a talented major league baseball player, husband, and father of three, who has fallen so far from grace that his home for the past twenty-two years has been the street. Author William Kennedy takes us into the mind and heart of a homeless vagrant and explores the situations which have brought Francis to this heartbreaking station in life. Francis' denigration of himself and his common-law wife, Helen, makes for a disturbing read, and yet the novel is ultimately uplifting. It begins not with Francis' fall from grace, but rather with the day on which he begins his journey towards redemption.

It is the night before Halloween in 1938, and Francis, who left his family for good back in 1916, is beginning to think about all that he's left behind. This is a sea change for Francis, who has perfected the art of forgetting. His life has become so base and desolate that he does not even wish to remember what happened yesterday, much less explore the painful memories of the events which led him to take flight from his home in the first place. He is helped along in his recollections by the appearance of ghosts from his past. He sees and converses with men he has killed, and men he's befriended or helped along the way. The ghosts act as Francis' conscience, which he has ignored for so long that it must manifest itself in the form of these apparitions. The novel's events take place over a period of only three days, in which Francis walks the streets of his youth and gradually comes to terms with the past he fled so long ago. By the end of the novel, Francis has, surprisingly, returned home to live with the wife and family he abandoned twenty-two years before. He has not, in the short space of three days, become a fully changed person, but the story ends on a hopeful note as Francis, given a choice to run away or to stay, chooses to stay for the first time in his adult life.

Chapter 1

Chapter 1 Summary

When we meet the protagonist, Francis Phelan, he is embarking on his first day of honest labor in several years. He is also sober for the first time in years, having gone without a drink for two days running. He stopped drinking because he had wanted to be sober for his court appearance. Francis has registered twenty-one times to vote in the last election, but his attorney, Marcus Gorman, found a mistake in the legal paperwork which resulted in the charges against Francis being thrown out. But Gorman insists that Francis pay him his attorney' fees, which Gorman has reduced from five-hundred to fifty dollars, thanks to the intervention of a mutual friend, Martin Daugherty. It is Gorman who arranges this day's work at Saint Agnes Cemetery, to help Francis pay his fee.

So today, Francis rides a truck up the winding cemetery road with his friend Rudy for a day of filling in sunken graves with fresh dirt. The truck rattles its way up the hill, drawing Francis closer and closer to the graves of his parents and his infant son. Francis imagines his parents' reaction to his arrival. He pictures his father, in his grave, smoking dried up weeds in his pipe. His mother he envisions turning over in her grave at his approach, braiding crosses from the roots of the weeds growing above her head, and forcing herself to eat the bitter crosses. This trip to the graveyard is a homecoming of sorts for Francis, and he recognizes familiar names marked on the headstones, people from his old neighborhood, from his former life before he became a bum. The dead recognize him, too; they recall what a star he was when he played baseball for Albany.

Francis studiously avoids his family graves all day as he and Rudy shovel dirt on top of sunken graves. He feels revitalized without the alcohol in his system, and recalls his early morning walk to the cemetery with Rudy. It was a six-mile walk and carried him past the house where he was born and raised, where his brothers and sisters still live. Three years before, when his mother died, Francis had attempted to visit the house, but had not been well received. The long morning walk brought back such memories, as he and Rudy traversed the paths he'd tread as a young man. In front of Frankie Leikheim's plumbing shop, Francis had found a piece of twine on the ground, which he used to replace the missing shoelace on one of his hand-me-down boots. He remembers Frankie Leikheim from when they were kids, and is ashamed of what he's become when he sees that Frankie's got his own business. Francis also feels ashamed of the twine on his boot and his body odor, which he hasn't bothered to notice for years. Rudy's idle chatter about cowardice being a deadly sin causes Francis to become defensive, as do Rudy's questions about Helen, Francis' lady friend. Francis doesn't know where Helen has wandered off to, and is worried about her. Rudy changes the subject to the news about a Martian landing, which had caused a panic the night before. Francis doesn't take anything Rudy says seriously.

But by the time they've finished their work for the day, Francis has decided to take care of some serious business after all. He visits his parents' graves first, remembering the horrible accident that killed his father. Francis had been bringing his father his lunch pail, and Michael Phelan, seeing his son approach, had moved towards him, stepping into the path of an on-rushing train, which had sent Michael's body fifty feet into the air. He'd died two weeks later, and all of the railroad track workers had shown up at the funeral of their most popular track foreman. His death left Francis in the care of his unloving mother, Kathryn Phelan, who now rests beside her husband. After visiting his parents, Francis' feet carry him unwaveringly toward the grave of his infant son, Gerald. The ghosts in the graveyard watch him approach the grave he has never before visited, and marvel at how "the living could move instinctually toward dead kin without foreknowledge of their location." (pg. 16)

As Rudy looks on from a distance, Francis makes peace with his dead son. He silently relives the awful events of the day when he dropped is son on the ground, killing him instantly. Then Francis talks to Gerald in the grave, explaining that today is the first time he's allowed himself to remember these things. He remembers that his nine-year old son, Billy, had witnessed the accident, and Francis tells Gerald that he ran into Billy about a week ago. Billy had told him that Gerald's mother doesn't blamed Francis for the accident, and in fact had never told a soul in twenty-two years that it was Francis who let the baby fall. Francis asks his son if his ability to finally remember and talk about these events might mean that he can finally let go of the past. The baby doesn't answer, but silently wills his father to perform some other final acts of expiation for abandoning his family. "You will not know, the child silently said, what these acts are until you have performed them all. And after you have performed them you will not understand that they were expiatory any more than you have understood all the other expiation that has kept you in such prolonged humiliation. Then, when these final acts are complete, you will stop trying to die because of me." (pg. 19) Francis dries his tears, and when Rudy asks whose grave it is, Francis tells him only that it belongs to a kid he once knew, who died in a fall.

Chapter 1 Analysis

As the novel opens, Francis Phelan is embarking on a long-delayed journey towards redemption. Through his visit to Saint Agnes Cemetery, where the ghosts of his past lie buried, we learn that Francis had abandoned his family twenty-two years prior, after having accidentally caused the death of his infant son. In the twenty-two years since, Francis has been brought low, to the ultimate humility of vagrancy, drunkenness, and disgrace. A series of coincidences now seems intent on bringing Francis back to the fold, to face his demons once and for all. First, he runs into his grown son Billy, and finds out that his wife has protected him all these years. Never had she accused him, blamed him, or even told anyone that he was the one who dropped the boy. Although the author never comes out and states the importance of this discovery to Francis, it sets the groundwork which allows him to begin his new path to redemption. It becomes clear, from Francis' reaction to the news of his wife's loyalty, that it was the thought of her recriminations for killing their son, which have kept him away for so long. If she can

forgive him, however, it opens up the possibility in Francis' mind that he might be able to forgive himself.

The perspective of this novel shows us life through the eyes of a street vagrant. The subject matter is tragic, and yet the author imbues it with human warmth as well as a certain poetic whimsy, demonstrated by the amusingly life-like ghosts that inhabit its pages. William Kennedy does not patronize his protagonist; Francis Phelan is drawn as a fully fleshed-out human being who has run away from some very difficult things in his life. His journey to redeem himself, though it comes years too late, still inspires hope in the reader that it is never too late for personal redemption. As we join Francis on his quest, we can only hope that he will succeed. For his life is not in the hands of the Catholic, Baptist, or Methodist missions; his life is in his own hands, and down and out though he might be, he is still a person with will and volition, capable of making his own choices.

Chapter 2

Chapter 2 Summary

With money in their pockets, Francis and Rudy enjoy the luxury of a trolley ride back downtown. Francis knows the trolleys intimately; before he became a bum, he worked for years on the trolleys at the North Albany carbarns. He'd even killed a man over a trolley during the 1901 trolley strike. Rudy asks questions during the ride; he wants to know where they're going and what Helen's last name is. Francis doesn't like questions about his personal life, and avoids answering. However, as the trolley threads through his old neighborhood, he does volunteer that he used to live down at the bottom of one of these streets. He immediately regrets sharing that detail with Rudy, whom he's only known for two weeks. Rudy has shared some personal information with Francis, divulging that he's dying from stomach cancer. Francis wants only the bonds of brotherhood forged by fellow travelers whose sole concern is surviving the next twenty minutes. Nevertheless, he can't help divulging a few more details about his life as Rudy continues to take an interest, as the trolley taking Francis by his old haunts: his former home of eighteen years, the carbarns where he'd worked.

The carbarns provoke Francis' memory of the strike of 1901. They had hung bedsheets from the overhead electric wires to surround a troop-guarded trolley full of scabs. Francis had helped set the bedsheets on fire, trapping the strikebreaking workers behind walls of flame. Francis was the first man to throw a stone at the trapped scabs. With his strong pitching arm, he cracked open the skull of the trolley conductor. When the crowd saw that scab fall, they began pelting stones at the trolley, inspiring the armed guards to shoot randomly into the crowd hoping to protect themselves. Two men in the crowd were killed by the bullets, but Francis got away, along with his brother Chick and his buddies Martin Daugherty and Patsy McCall. They hid out with Francis' father-in-law, Iron Joe Farrell, who ran the water filtration plant. Knowing he'd killed the scab, Francis hopped a northbound train, eventually traveling as far as Ohio. Francis was twenty-one, and had never before killed a man.

The dead scab was Harold Allen, a twenty-nine year old single man with two years of college and non-combat experience in the Spanish-American War. He'd been an itinerant housepainter who was lucky to find work as a strikebreaker. Today, as his ghost confronts Francis on the trolley, he is dressed in a long black coat and a motorman's cap, as he had been the day of the strike. Harold Allen silently asks Francis why he killed him. Francis claims he didn't mean to, which Allen doesn't buy. So Francis justifies his action by telling Allen that he was stealing his job and the food from his family's mouth. Allen thinks this is laughable coming from a man who abandoned his family twenty-two years ago, and never looked back. Rudy thinks Francis is talking to him when he points out the spot where he'd jumped a train a few days after the trolley strike.

Two men had come running toward the train Francis was on, with police shooting at them. Francis had held out a hand to help up one of the men, but the cops shot him just

before Francis could pull him onto the train. The man's partner was grateful for his attempt to help, and told Francis that the two fugitives were escaped prisoners, who'd been able to slip away with all the confusion caused by the strike. The dead man, Aldo Campione, now sits on the trolley next to Harold Allen, dressed humbly. Francis sees Campione as having lived as a low-life, and died a lowly death. Francis had reached for his hand that day on the train because he saw something of himself on Aldo's face. Today, Francis refuses to shake hands with the man.

As Francis and Rudy approach the door of the Methodist Mission, where Francis hopes to find Helen, they see a woman lying on the street. The woman's name is Sandra and she's passed out in a drunken stupor. Francis worries about her, because she doesn't look like she can survive a night without shelter from the cold. They can't take her into the mission because Reverend Chester doesn't allow the inebriated admission, but Francis promises to bring her a hot cup of soup. Inside the mission, he finds Helen listening to the obligatory sermon that Reverend Chester insists on giving before providing any food. She is a strict Catholic, and Francis knows she can't take a Methodist minister seriously. No one does, and when the reverend finally finishes his sermon, his captive audience gratefully bellies up to the food line.

Francis asks Pee Wee, the mission manager and a former vagrant, for a cup of soup for Sandra. Pee Wee agrees, but refuses to bend the rules to allow her shelter for the night, and advises Francis not to mention the soup to Reverend Chester. After feeding Sandra, Francis returns inside and sits next to Helen. She's cagey about where she's been, but is genuinely pleased to see Francis sober. He tells her about the six dollars he earned at the cemetery, and when the reverend offers Francis a job working for Rosskam, the local ragman, he agrees to take it, and hits up the reverend for a new pair of socks. After the reverend walks away, Rudy asks Francis if they can go get that drink he promised him that morning. Francis, reacting to Helen's disapproval, tells Rudy that he's changed his mind since this morning. Helen reminds Francis that with six dollars, they can get a room and get their suitcase out of hock, but Francis says he can't spend the whole six because he has a debt to his lawyer. Francis and Helen discuss where they'll spend the night. Last night, Francis slept in the weeds, and nearly froze to death. Helen found a room at the home of their friends, Jack and Clara.

Pee Wee joins them at the table. Francis recalls his first meeting Pee Wee three years earlier; they'd stayed drunk together for a month. Pee Wee had gotten off the sauce by the time Francis returned to town a few weeks ago. Francis came back because he'd been recruited by the Democrats to register to vote repeatedly, at five bucks a pop. Francis feels his friend's new sobriety has made him an emotional cripple, but he still likes Pee Wee. Tonight Pee Wee tells him that their mutual friend, Oscar Reo, works in town as a bartender, singing for his supper. They remark on his comedown in life, for Reo's voice was once heard on radio stations, until booze got the best of him. Pee Wee and Francis had once spent three drunken days in New York with Oscar. They decide to go see the show at Oscar's bar, the Gilded Cage, but before they leave, the reverend kicks out a bum named Little Red for being on the sauce. Only Helen is kind to the evictee, pressing a cigarette in his hand. Later at the Gilded Cage, Oscar sings for the crowd, and Francis is mystified at how such talent could have failed to guarantee Oscar

a better life. He thinks of Helen's talent, too; she is a Vassar-trained singer, and had performed on the radio. Francis asks her to sing, but she feels shy about her ragged appearance. She finally conquers her fear, and conquers the hearts and minds of the audience; such a beautiful voice issuing from such a hard-worn woman. Oscar begs her to take a job at the Gilded Cage and Helen thanks him prettily. Then she snaps out of her daydream; the audience is not really paying her much attention, and Oscar only compliments her and invites her to sing again for free another time.

Chapter 2 Analysis

The fact that Francis has only known his friend Rudy for two weeks, coupled with the fact that Francis does not like to answer Rudy's personal questions, reveals the wall of isolation Francis has built around himself. Francis carries such shame and guilt that he truly believes he's doing others a favor by denying them his heart and his presence in their lives. Some might call it expiation for the sins of his past, for he feels unworthy of associating with his fellow human beings. Others might just call it cowardice, which is a word Francis hates, for on some level he realizes that abandoning his family and denying Helen and Rudy a piece of his heart is cowardice of the worst kind. Francis admits he feels more comfortable on the run. Running away is easier for him than facing the life he's created. He doesn't feel he's up to the challenge of living with his mistakes, much less trying to correct them, and so he runs. He instinctively creates situations in his life that force him to be on the run.

As Francis continues his journey towards redemption, both he and the reader will learn more about the roots of the violence in his life, how and why it launched him into a permanent state of flight. For now, Francis is only beginning to confront the ghosts of his past. Harold Allen speaks with the voice of Francis' conscience, shooting down all of Francis' justifications for that first murder. Aldo Campione, however, represents Francis himself. Francis tells us the reason he'd risked getting shot to help Aldo in the first place was because he saw himself in Aldo's face; for that same reason, he refuses to shake Aldo's hand now when the ghost offers it. Francis has come to feel so badly about himself that he wouldn't cross the street to spit on anyone who resembles him. Thus, the appearance of the ghosts shows us how Francis feels now in comparison to how he felt about his violent acts while he was committing them. In some ways, he's grown, but he continues to justify and deny his responsibility; he has not yet found the courage to take responsibility for his crimes. Despite this denial, Francis must have felt some remorse even at the time, for the fact that he can recall the lives of these dead men in such detail after all these years, shows that he went to some trouble to learn about his victims.

In Chapter II, we also meet Helen, and through her character begin to get a different perspective on Francis Phelan. Helen tells Oscar about the good old days when she and Francis had an apartment with dishes and furniture, an ice box full of food, and flowerpots full of geraniums. Francis has trouble remembering, but he knows denial of his past is habitual with him, so he defers to Helen's memory. Helen tells Oscar that Francis had increased his drinking so that he couldn't keep a job, and they had had to

sell their nice china and give up Helen's upright piano. Francis isn't sure he remembers any of this, and the reader can't be sure if Helen isn't merely expressing her wish. For in singing about love on stage, Helen reveals the deep passion for love that she carries in her soul. Francis is not the only man she's ever loved, but he is her last great love. Helen, who Francis believes to be content floating aimlessly through life at his side, reveals to the reader that she has never given up on Francis, and that her main goal is to find a home with him where she can finally be at rest and at peace. Through this woman's character, the reader will come to see the pain Francis has caused the women in his life by refusing to believe that he's loveable, he never acknowledges the love they feels for him.

Chapter 3

Chapter 3 Summary

After they leave the bar, Rudy disappears to find a flophouse for the night. Helen and Francis walk Pee Wee back to the shelter, intending to get a room at Palombo's Hotel with the wages Francis earned that day. When they arrive at the mission, they find Sandra lying dead where they'd left her, half eaten by some mongrel dogs which roam the streets. As Francis and Pee Wee examine the body, a group of trick-or-treaters surrounds Helen, jeering at her and poking her with a stick. The masked kids steal her purse and run off into the night, despite Pee Wee and Francis' efforts to chase them. When they return to Helen's side, she is distraught because, not only were Francis' wages in her purse, there was also fifteen dollars. She had saved this money secretly when Francis' son Billy had given them some cash the night he found them at Spanish George's a week or two before. Meanwhile, Pee Wee arranges to have Sandra's body taken inside, and Francis sarcastically asks him if it's okay that she goes in, given that she must still have alcohol in her bloodstream. They reject Pee Wee's offer of a mission bed for the night and walk up to Jack and Clara's apartment where Helen flopped the night before.

On the way, Francis sees Aldo Campione's ghost again, and a new ghost whom Francis recognizes as Dick Doolan, the bum he'd killed after Doolan tried to cut off Francis' feet with a meat cleaver. The ghosts prompt him to tell Helen that he visited Gerald's grave; she knows he's never been to his son's grave before, and wonders what's gotten into him. He tells her that it's because of what his son Billy had told him when they saw him last week, about how Annie had never blamed Francis for dropping Gerald. Helen suggests he go see his family since they're so much on his mind, but Francis changes the subject. At Jack's house, Jack only lets Francis enter when he sees Helen is with him. His companion, Clara, sits perched atop a chamber pot in the living room, suffering from some malady. Jack encourages Francis to take a steady job and give Helen a real future. Francis talks about his new secondhand boots, and ashamed of the twine he uses instead of a shoelace, he lies and tells everyone he has a shoelace in his pocket. When Clara tells him to lace up the shoe, Francis has to admit his lie. He seeks refuge in the bathroom, where he washes his genitals and buttocks for the first time in recent memory, then borrows Jack's razor and a pair of Jack's old underpants.

In the bathroom, Francis talks to the ghost of Rowdy Dick Doolan, the bum who'd tried to cut off his feet. Francis had passed the time under a bridge with Rowdy Dick and some other homeless men by regaling them with baseball stories from his glory days. Rowdy Dick, a young man who had never had any glory days, became so jealous of Francis that he attacked him, seeking to cut off his feet and steal his shoes. Francis had lost a finger and the tip of his nose defending himself from Dick's meat cleaver, and had thrown Dick bodily into the concrete abutment under the bridge, killing him instantly. Francis had done the only thing he knew how to do: he ran, catching another boxcar out

of town. In the bathroom, he comes to terms with Dick's ghost, forgiving the dead man for attacking him and provoking the violence. Helen hears him talking and calls him out.

Back in the living room, he discovers that Jack and Clara won't allow them to stay because Clara is jealous of Helen. Jack sends them off with a sandwich, and Helen and Francis get in a fight because she refuses to eat it. Helen walks away from him, but down the street, she sees black men huddled around a fire, one of them on top of a white woman. She returns to Francis and he takes her, over her objections, to Finny's car, where he leaves her to go sleep in the weeds. Francis walks and walks until he finds shelter in a barn not seventy-five feet from his wife, Annie's house. He thinks about Helen, who has most certainly had to have sex with Finney in exchange for sleeping in the shelter of his car. Francis accepts this, as he would have accepted the necessity of sleeping with Clara to get a room in the apartment she shares with Jack. "Fornication was standard survival currency everywhere, was it not?" (pg. 89)

Chapter 3 Analysis

In the first two chapters, Francis has begun to be bothered by his body odor; by Chapter III, he's begun to do something about it. This is unusual for him; having lived like a filthy bum for so many years, he neither noticed nor cared about his bad smell. His new job and new sobriety, along with his recent efforts to make peace with his past, begin to instill in Francis a sense of pride in his personal appearance he hasn't felt in ages. The pride manifests first as shame, of course, for there is nothing about his ragged, soiled appearance in which he can take pride. He begins to clean up his act, bit by bit. The piece of string he picks up because he lacks a shoelace is the turning point. For some reason this lack of shoelace represents to Francis how low he's fallen in life, and he's ashamed enough to gradually begin improving his personal appearance. It starts with the socks he requests from Reverend Chester, and later, at Jack's apartment, Francis bathes his groin area and shaves his face. For those who are metaphysically minded, it is interesting to note that Francis begins his transformations by cleaning up his feet and groin area, which are the two locations of the root chakra in traditional alternative medicine practices. The root chakra represents one's security, stability, and roots, and provides an apt metaphor for the part of his life Francis seeks to transform. In later chapters, Francis will continue to improve his personal hygiene, but it will not be until he is home with his family that he takes a full bath and puts on a full suit of fresh clothing. Thus, the transformation of his hygiene parallels his return journey back to his life.

The relationship between sex and survival is also explored in Chapter III, as we learn what desperate conditions Francis is willing to subject Helen to. Unlike Francis, she has never accepted her lot as a street person. She holds tight to her memories, real or imagined, of having a real life and a real home with Francis. Her fundamental drive throughout the novel is to return home, but she loves Francis so deeply that nothing would seem like home without him. For this reason, she stays on the streets with him, never giving up on him although he's long ago given up on himself. Francis is unaware of Helen's hopes for his life, or how hurtful it is to her when he pimps her out to Finny for the use of his car. Francis has accepted his life at the level of base survival, and sees

sex as merely another survival tool. Likely, he would not understand if Helen ever explained she trades sex for shelter out of loyalty to Francis; it's what she or any street person must do to survive. By keeping her on the streets because of his violence and drinking, Francis has condemned her to a life even lower than the life of a street prostitute, who at least receive cash for their services. Helen, and other women like her, are so reduced that they do not freely barter their sexual services for a night's shelter. Their services are demanded in exchange for shelter, and are provided only out of base necessity. Helen knows that by sleeping in Finny's car, she will have to agree to sleep with Finny, and Francis knows it too. What Francis does not know is how much it hurts Helen that he allows this. He assumes that she's given up on his ability to lead a normal life, he thinks she accepts, as he does, his vagrant status; he would be stunned to find out that Helen believes in him, and has hopes of a normal future with the man she loves.

Chapter 4

Chapter 4 Summary

The next morning, Francis approaches the sea of debris surrounding Rosskam's junk shop. He meets Rosskam and settles on a price of seven dollars for working until dark; Francis feels he deserves more for the heavy physical labor, but resentfully accepts that beggars can't be choosers. He's worried about Helen, who hadn't shown up at the mission to have her morning coffee with him. His worry has been tempered by a story he read that morning in the local newspaper. Martin Daugherty, the newspaperman who used to live next door to Francis, the same man who put in a good word with Francis' attorney resulting in a reduced fee, has written an article in support of Francis' son. Billy had gotten into some trouble recently for his involvement in kidnapping the nephew of Patsy McCall. Patsy, once Francis' friend, has gone on to become a political boss in Albany, and Daugherty's article takes McCall to task for his shabby treatment of Billy Phelan, painting Billy as a local labor hero.

Francis rides with Rosskam in his horse-drawn wagon as they begin to cover Rosskam's regular route, where he purchases junk from residential homes and resells it after stripping or refurbishing the items. On the way, Rosskam asks him how he feels about sex, having heard that bums engage in various kinky practices. Rosskam stops the car in front of a woman's home and advises Francis that he will be inside for a little while, having sex with the woman. He advises Francis that the woman likes to be watched, so if he's of the mind, he can watch from the cellar window. Francis says no, but as he waits on Third Street, Francis recalls the voyeuristic pleasure he'd taken as a young boy one night when he'd caught the neighbors engaging in naked foreplay in front of their window. This memory drives Francis to the cellar window. He thinks of all the women he has known sexually over his years as a bum, and most of the memories are unpleasant: women being gang-banged, an eight-year-old girl being raped. He leaves the window and remembers his first time with Helen. Wanting to show her more respect than the other vagrant women he'd slept with, Francis had insisted they both get blood tests at the local hospital before renting a room for the night.

When the wagon rolls on, Rosskam heads for Colonie Street, where Francis was born and raised. Without explaining why, he asks Rosskam to stop the wagon for a long moment in front of his parents' house. He drifts into memory, imagining his parents as newlyweds, recalling the resentful manner in which his mother had submitted to his father's sexual desires. She was a strict Catholic who believed sex was sinful, and Francis, as a child, often heard her protests through the thin walls. At the next stop just across the street, Francis refuses to help Rosskam load the wagon, not wanting to be seen by his former neighbors, who don't know he's become a bum. He waits in the wagon, staring at his childhood home, and recalling his first sexual encounter with Katrina Daugherty. The older, married woman had systematically seduced the young, innocent Francis. The first time she'd appeared naked before him, she acted as if she were having a spell, and rather than take advantage of the situation, Francis covered

her up and brought her inside - a merciful act witnessed by Katrina's then nine-year old son, Martin; the same newspaperman who has grown up to be a supporter of the Phelan family. Over time, the beautiful and manipulative Katrina succeeded in seducing Francis, who fell in love with her, but who really fell in love with the idea of finding his very own woman to love..."a love he would never have to share with any man, or boy, like himself." (pg. 116) Katrina had died in a fire in 1912, and now her ghost appears to Francis. He recalls the bittersweet memories of their affair, and buys from Rosskam, a soft white on white shirt just loaded onto the wagon, for it reminds him a shirt Katrina once gave him.

Chapter 4 Analysis

In Chapter 4, Francis confronts his sexual history. Still unaware of the damage he's doing to Helen, Francis seems to understand, subconsciously, that he's hurting her. His imperfect, but growing, understanding is conveyed with his trip down his sexual memory lane. Revisiting his past sexual actions is all a part of Francis' journey towards redemption, aided, as before, by the serendipitous hand of fate. Had Rosskam asked Francis to watch him have sex with a woman on any other street, Francis probably would not have done so. However, the lady happens to live on Third Street, which brings back to Francis an innocent memory of boyish voyeurism. Francis doesn't sound like he was a peeping tom as a child; he merely chanced on a tantalizing glimpse of forbidden fruit. Thanks to that innocent memory, Francis decides to watch Rosskam with the woman after all, but the adult reality is a far cry from his innocent childhood exploration. Instead, it brings to mind image after image of homeless women being sexually denigrated on the mean streets. Francis is beginning to repent for the disrespectful way he's treated women. He had been under the illusion that he'd treated Helen respectfully by insisting they both get a clean bill of health before making love for the first time. It cannot be lost on him, though, that pimping Helen out to Finny and leaving her to fend for herself on the streets does not jibe with his initial plan to treat her respectfully.

His bittersweet memories of Katrina Daugherty provide the reader with a clue as to the origins of Francis' hatred of women. The author has done a nice job of timing Francis' memories of Katrina and telling the story in such a way that the reader realizes Katrina used and hurt Francis, although Francis is only vaguely aware that she treated him badly. Perhaps his inability to realize Katrina took advantage of him contributes to his inability to realize that he harbors hatred for women, for Francis doesn't seem to be aware of this simple fact. He's abandoned his wife, mistreated a score of women over the years, and now pimps out Helen, the woman he professes to love. And yet he doesn't realize his behavior is wrong or disrespectful; he is vaguely aware that he's letting Helen down, but doesn't allow himself to see the extent of the damage he's causing. It is illuminating when the author conveys that Francis doesn't see the extent of the damage Katrina caused him. If he can realize that his first love treated him as badly as his mother treated him, he may yet come to understand that everything he learned about relationships was wrong, and has resulted in his cruel behavior towards the women in his life.

Chapter 5

Chapter 5 Summary

Helen sings in her room at Palombo's Hotel, feeling elegant in the dime-store kimono that she once shoplifted from Woolworth's that no man besides Francis has ever seen her wear. Helen had started the day singing, from the moment she slipped out of Finny's car until she arrived at Saint Anthony's Catholic Church to attend services. At church, she lights a candle for Francis. Helen decided, last night while holding Finny's withered penis in her hands, that she needed to stay away from Francis for a while, for both of their sakes. "She would stay out of his life, for she understood that by depositing her once again with Finny, and knowing precisely what that would mean for her, Francis was willfully cuckolding himself, willfully debasing her, and, withal, separating them both from what still survived of their mutual love and esteem." (pg. 121) She will no longer allow him to further lower himself by mistreating her, nor will she allow herself to be further mistreated. She wonders why she's allowed it in the past, and realizes that she is subservient to her man, and always has been. She knows if she had ever given up, Francis would not have pursued her. She has maintained the relationship all these years, walking away countless times, always returning to him in the end, but not this time.

She recalls her promising career as a singer. She had attended Vassar, and had plans to continue her studies at the Paris Conservatory. Two months into her studies at Vassar, her father had died, and her mother had informed her that she wouldn't allow Helen to squander her inheritance on impractical music lessons. The money would go to finance her brother, Patrick's final year of law school, which Helen's mother maintained would be the best way to invest the money left by her father. With few prospects, Helen had found a job in a piano store, and had eventually become lovers with the married owner, Arthur. By the time Helen was twenty-seven, she accepted the fact that she would never obtain either a husband or a musical career. Arthur eventually dumped her for a younger mistress. It was twenty-one years after her father's death when Helen discovered his will, hidden away by her mother in a locked diary. He had left half of his estate to Helen, and directed the other half to be split between her mother and Patrick. Upon discovering what her mother did to her life, Helen moved to New York, leaving the ailing widow to be nursed by the brother who never even returned Helen's phone calls. In New York, she met Francis, who still owned a house in those days, and had steady work as a fix-it man. Francis wore a beard to disguise his appearance so the law wouldn't apprehend him for the long-ago trolley murder. Francis had lost his job because he'd developed a drinking problem, and abandoned Helen with the weepy, self-serving statement that he was no good to her or anybody else, and she'd be better off without him. His abandonment had left her with two options for supporting herself: prostitution or homelessness. She'd chosen homelessness.

This morning, after deciding to leave Francis, Helen shoplifted a precious Beethoven album and passed out in the store from her weakened condition. Francis hadn't

understood the day before when she'd refused to eat the sandwich that her stomach was causing her so much pain that she really couldn't have gotten it down. It took all her strength to walk to Palombo's Hotel, where she spends almost the last bit of money she has hidden in her bra to get her and Francis' suitcase back, and to rent their usual room. Alone in the room, she thinks of how Francis has let her down, but she also recognizes that she has stubbornly insisted on freedom at all cost throughout her life. When she'd left her job at Arthur's piano store, she had lied and told him she had a job playing piano for silent films. She has made her own decisions throughout her life, and her mind, even after years of homelessness, is still sound. Helen acknowledges that she's gotten to where she is through her own choices. She's lived a better life than most people would realize. Many people would look at her and see only an old bum. They wouldn't know that she keeps up with her current events and modern literature by spending time at the libraries, or that she's meticulous about washing her underwear and body, or that she's always tried to do the right thing, and has never accepted money from a man for sexual favors. She knows that she's made mistakes, but Helen prefers to call them decisions instead of sins; in this way she takes responsibility for the course of her life. Tonight, as she reviews her life, she loses herself in the memories that are much kinder than today's reality. She loses herself in the joy of the music. Shortly after the night man knocks on her door to check on her, she is lost to the world entirely.

Chapter 5 Analysis

In this chapter, we finally see the depth of the harm Francis has caused Helen. Since most of the book is written from Francis' point of view, we have had, up to now, only a very sketchy look at his relationship with Helen. This is because Francis is so overwhelmed by the pain he's caused others in his past that he's perfected the art of forgetting. Should Francis happen to remember something, he simply turns to the booze bottle until the memory is driven away. His early years with Helen have remained a mystery up until this chapter, which is told from Helen's point of view. We learn that Helen had a difficult life, but had fallen deeply in love with Francis back in the days when he was still capable of being a part of society. He had owned a home, and held a steady job when Helen moved in with him. When booze drove him to lose his job, Francis had taken the coward's way out by abandoning Helen. It is unclear whether she was forced by the terrible circumstances in which he'd left her to become a vagrant, or whether she voluntarily followed him to the streets. It seems most likely, based on what we know about her character, that she voluntarily followed him out of love.

Helen has an alarming character trait: her stubborn independence. While independence is an admirable trait, what makes it alarming is that there are many women as stubbornly independent as Helen, a trait encouraged by the more militant members of the 1960's feminist movement. Let her stand, for all of us, as a warning against the ills of pursuing independence to an extreme. Many women today have been raised to pay half of the cost of a dinner with a date, and to contribute half of the household expenses now that women have gained stronger parity in the workforce. This is considered modern, and is generally expected of women these days. Even modern psychology routinely decries the evils of codependence in relationships. Women asked for

independence and have received it in spades. Instead of asserting our voices and insisting that men be as present in the home as women are now in the work place, we agreed to retain total responsibility for our home lives, and promised never to let them interfere with our work. Unfortunately, the backlash of this social progress is evident in Helen's character. Many modern women now pride themselves on expecting absolutely nothing from their mates or their employers, and by going to this extreme of self-dependence, women risk winding up in Helen's position. For human beings, by our very nature, are interdependent creatures, and no man or woman can be wholly independent.

Helen's position is not a modern one. The modern side of Helen chose to expect nothing from Francis, although she has hopes. However, the traditional side of Helen makes the same choice as countless traditional women have before her, to stand by her man for better or for worse, until death do they part. Helen's love for Francis has always been greater than her self-esteem, and she even prays for death so that Francis can be morally free to return to his family. She has sacrificed herself for love, which is an age-old practice followed by men and women alike.

Chapter 6

Chapter 6 Summary

Rosskam and Francis have to halt the wagon because a fire has broken out which sends huge flames into the sky. They are choked by the smoke as policemen route traffic into a U-turn. Rosskam is forced to turn back up Pearl Street, following the line of Francis' old neighborhood. At the site of the trolley strike, Francis sees the ghost of Fiddler Quain, the man who helped him ignite the bedsheets on that fateful day in 1901. Soldiers had split open Fiddler's skull with a rifle butt and he lived for many years as a vegetable, cared for by his sister Martha. Martha had refused to forgive Francis, whom she blamed for encouraging her brother to commit the act of violence. Fiddler's ghost tells Francis not to worry about Fiddler's violent actions; Francis should worry about the violent actions he's committed with his own hands. Francis turns to Rosskam and asks him if he ever feels as if his hands act through their own volition, without his conscious consent. Rosskam just thinks that Francis is a nut. Francis remembers a baseball player named Skippy, whose injured hand cost him his career. Skippy had been so infuriated by his traitorous hand that he'd picked up a handful of flaming coals; the doctors had to cut off three fingers to save that hand. Francis stares at his hands, trying to recall the memory behind each scar.

Francis begins to realize that a larger pattern of violence has guided his life; he is close to understanding himself. He remembers that the cause of his permanent limp is that a bum had stolen an orange soda from him, and Francis had gone after him. The bum shattered Francis' leg bones with a shovel, and Francis had retaliated by taking a bite out of the back of his neck. Francis realizes he is the killer in the family, but tries to tell himself he never sought that life. The ghost of Harold Allen, the scab trolley conductor, rebukes Francis, reminding him that he had intended to kill him when he threw that stone. Francis denies it, but Allen reminds him that not only did Francis know how hard and accurately he could throw a baseball, but that Francis had actually spent the entire morning before the trolley strike searching through the weeds for stones the same weight as a baseball. Francis is beginning to accept responsibility for the men he's killed, but has not yet fully done so. He's still arguing with the ghosts of his conscience and still blaming his hands for his conduct, as if they had a will and volition of their own. He thinks about how he's always run away from his troubles, and remembers the moment this pattern began. It was when his own mother cut him out of her life for the crime of marrying a common woman like Annie. Francis had run from that situation, and he's never stopped. At this moment, he chooses to run again, telling Rosskam that he's finished with the day's work, although it is still two hours before dark. When Rosskam offers him only half wages, Francis threatens him with violence until Rosskam pays him $5.75 for three-quarters of a day.

Francis has run from Rosskam, but it is with the intention of returning home. He gets off the wagon on Annie's street and limps slowly towards his marital home. On the way, he alarms a passerby by asking her where he can get a turkey. The neighborhood children

are more helpful, and direct him to a butcher shop, where Francis lays down all but fifty cents of his new earnings to buy a twelve and a half pound turkey. He takes a roundabout path back to Annie's house, working up the courage to knock on the door. His wife doesn't recognize him at first, but when she realizes who he is, she opens the door wide and invites him in. Billy had told her he'd seen his father and invited him home, but Annie didn't think he'd actually show up. She tells him they saw the story in the paper about Francis registering twenty-one times to vote. He apologizes for his action if they caused her shame, but she reassures him they all thought it was funny. He looks over his wife, notices her teeth are now store bought, but aside from the expected wear and tear from housework, he thinks she looks great.

He recalls their first meeting. She had been coming into The Wheelbarrow saloon, which her father Iron Joe ran, for two months before Francis worked up the nerve to talk to her. The very first day he'd approached her, they'd wound up holding hands and sweet-talking each other between two piles of boards in Kibbee's lumberyard. He remembers their first kiss like it was yesterday. Annie thanks him for the turkey and offers to cook it. He doesn't want her to think he's expecting that from her, so tells her to just enjoy it on a Sunday after he's gone. She asks if he's going to run off so soon after arriving, and when he tells her he's not running off, she insists on cooking the turkey. She tells him that his grandson will be home soon. Francis wasn't aware he had a ten-year-old grandson, or that his daughter Peggy had married George Quinn. She tells him Peggy will be home soon, and that his son Billy is asleep in the other room. Billy had been on the run after the kidnapping affair that Francis had read about in the papers. Thanks to Martin Daugherty's editorial in support of Billy, he had recently been able to come back home. Francis tells Annie that he's been to Gerald's grave, and then Francis thanks her for never telling anyone that he had been the one who dropped Gerald. She tells him it was not his fault.

Annie asks him to sit at the kitchen table with her and tell her why he's finally come home. He says it started with Billy inviting him home and this got him thinking about all that he'd missed, never seeing Billy or Peggy growing up. Annie says something else must have changed in him to bring him back, and asks if it was because Billy saw him with another woman, his new wife Helen. Francis denies that Helen is his wife, and tells Annie that she is the only wife he has ever had. When Annie tells him that she's never been with another man, his guts freeze. He blames her monogamy on religion, but Annie sets him straight; she never wanted anyone else but Francis. He admits to having been with Helen on and off for nine years, and says that she's a damn good woman, but that he was no more capable of marrying her and being a husband than he was with Annie. Annie tells him that Helen needs him, and asks Francis what he needs. He tells her he doesn't want anything from her, that he just needed to see her, and that although he's been all over, he's never found anything as good as her and this house. He reminds her of their first meeting at Kibbee's, and says that it feels as if it had happened just this morning. The only thing he admits to needing is a sandwich and a cup of tea.

They settle into casual chit-chat as Annie dresses the turkey. He thinks of his family and this home, and feels that he could be with them again. He remembers how Billy had given him a cigarette even though Francis was coughing so hard. "He knows what a

man needs, Billy does." (pg. 164) Danny arrives home and meets his grandfather. Danny asks what happened to his teeth; Francis simply replies he and his teeth have parted company. In response to Danny's question whether Francis is Grandpa Phelan or Grandpa Quinn, Annie tells him that he is Francis Aloysius Phelan. Francis chuckles to hear his full name spoken for the first time in many years. Danny tells his new grandpa that he's heard about him, and wants him to teach him to pitch. Grandpa agrees and demonstrates the motion Danny needs to learn to throw an inshoot. Then Danny wakes up Billy, who cancels his evening plans to stay for the turkey dinner. Annie leads Francis up to the attic where she's kept a box of his things. Inside he finds his glove, ball, and several of his suits. He also finds a letter, which he reads and then pockets. He gives the ball to Danny and then takes Annie up on her offer to let him rest and bathe in Danny's room. He emerges in his suit, cleaned up for the first time in years, and the family compliments him, trying not to dwell on the immensity of the transformation.

Before dinner, Francis and Annie have a moment alone in the backyard. She asks if he wants to come home permanently, and tries to talk a reluctant Francis into it. She mentions that she's purchased a grave for him in the family plot next to her, near where their infant son is buried. She tells him her bitterness has somehow faded over the years, but warns him that Peg's has not. Peg arrives shortly and proves that she is indeed bitter towards Francis. Her antagonism makes him want to leave, but the rest of the family defends him and she stalks out of the kitchen. Billy gives Francis ten dollars, which Francis tries to give to Annie. Billy laughs and says the reason the Phelan family is so broke is because they give away all their money. Peg returns and softens her attitude toward her father, offering to make his favorite pudding for dessert. Francis takes out the letter he found in his trunk and reads it aloud. It was a letter Peggy had written him when she was a child, while he was off playing baseball, telling him how much she missed him. Francis tells her it's the only letter he'd ever bothered to save in his life. Soon after, Peg's husband George arrives home from work, and the whole Phelan family sits down to dinner.

Chapter 6 Analysis

With his homecoming, Francis' physical transformation is complete. The process of self cleansing he'd begun in the first three chapters, and augmented in Chapter 4 with the addition of a new white shirt to his wardrobe, is finalized as he actually bathes himself and puts on the clothes which Annie has saved for twenty-two years. He no longer looks like a bum, but like his old self. The fact that the clothes still fit him symbolizes his growing feeling that his family still fits into his life. It is as if the home he left behind has existed in a time capsule all these years, only to be unearthed upon his homecoming. The financial and emotional miseries that his family had endured are now behind them. He has finally stayed away long enough, for he is able to return home without recrimination. For Francis this lack of recrimination is crucial. He has proven himself a coward over the years, and has one foot out the door even as he is returning to his family. His daughter's recriminations nearly drive him away, and seeing this, Annie and Billy turn on the wholly justified Peg in order to make Francis feel safe.

Can the reader sympathize with Francis upon his homecoming? Absolutely. We can see that he's punished himself far worse than his loved ones could, or would have. His self-punishment is only another facet of his cowardice. Unable to face the consequences of his actions or take responsibility for them in any way, Francis has always found it easier to run. He punishes himself only to justify his running away. The reader is able to sympathize with Francis because he's put himself through something no human being should ever have to suffer. We can't agree, however, with Francis' choices or point of view. He is the author of his own suffering, and so, while we sympathize with his circumstances, we must also blame him for damaging himself and his loved ones. This blame should be tempered with mercy because Francis' actions show him to be an emotionally broken man, incapable of caring for himself or others with even a basic level of human respect. We can only hope that his marvelously accepting family will provide him with the love he needs to heal his self-inflicted wounds. There is hope for Francis Phelan, but the choice is his. At the end of Chapter VI, he still chooses to walk away from the salvation that his family offers.

Chapter 7

Chapter 7 Summary

That night Francis is back on the streets with Rudy. They head toward the Palombo Hotel because Francis was unable to find Helen at the mission. The night clerk at Palombo's tells Francis that Helen is staying in their old room, and that she had gotten their suitcase out of hock. Francis gives him two dollars to give to Helen, and asks the man to look in on her to be sure she's all right, but not to mention that Francis was there. The clerk knocks on her door as instructed, and reports back to Francis that she's fine. He and Rudy leave the hotel, and Francis spends most of the ten dollars Billy gave him on alcohol for himself and Rudy. For the first time in a week, he begins to drink. They take their booze to a run-down flophouse where Francis spends a dollar to get beds for them. Upstairs in the flophouse, they run into Francis' old friend Moose, and his friend Old Shoes, who claims that he's no longer a bum, has a wife, a house, and a car now, and is just visiting his old haunts. Some other bums show up, but they are not friends of Francis. The group includes Little Red, the bum who'd been kicked out of the mission. Little Red is drunk and mean and makes fun of Rudy for singing. Francis attacks Little Red, and he, Rudy, and Moose clear out of the flophouse, accepting a ride in Old Shoes' car.

As they drive away in the wake of his violence, Francis comes to an important realization. He recalls how the business leader Emmett Daugherty, Katrina's father-in-law, had radicalized Francis. The powerful older man had convinced the young Francis of the glories of fighting for the cause. Emmett's vision of Francis was as an underground hero who'd killed for the labor cause, and whose romantic exile for throwing the first stone in the trolley strike was a testament to his loyalty. Francis begins to realize that his life story was written by men more powerful than he, men who didn't mind sacrificing the young Francis for their cause. Emmett's son Edward, Katrina's husband, was a newspaperman, as his son Martin would one day become. Edward, inspired by his father's point of view, had written glowingly of Francis' status as a warrior hero, a liberator of the people. "But now, with those events so deeply dead and buried, with his own guilt having so little really to do with it, he saw the strike as simply the insanity of the Irish, poor against poor, a race, a class divided against itself." (pg. 207) Francis realizes the stone he threw was not the cause of the unrest and the subsequent violence. He puts his own actions into a larger perspective for the first time.

He and his friends arrive at a vagrants' camp known as the jungle. Lean-tos and other hastily constructed shelters dot the landscape, and campfires burn in the night. They settle around a campfire, drinking wine and sharing each other's company. Francis muses on the kiss Peggy had placed on his cheek before he left, and thinks of Annie's invitation to return. She had offered to set up a cot in Danny's room if Francis wanted to spend the night next time. Francis is inspired to share the turkey sandwiches Annie had given him with his friends, and with a family of strangers who are camped out with their infant child. He confesses, for the first time, that it was he who dropped his son, but the

men he calls friends barely know him, and Francis feels that his confession is wasted. He gets down on himself for cheapening something so important by sharing it with these strange men. Just then, a group of Legionnaires arrives to break up the camp. The raiders advance on the homeless, swinging their bats at people and their makeshift shelters. One of the raiders strikes Rudy, bringing him to the ground. Francis takes the man's bat and breaks his back, possibly killing him. He leads Rudy to the nearest hospital, where Rudy dies in the waiting room.

At three-fifteen a.m., Francis returns to Palombo's Hotel, hoping to spend the night with Helen. She doesn't answer his knock, so he walks in to find her stretched out on the floor, wearing her kimono, with her hair fanned out beautifully around her face. She looks like she's sleeping, but she is not. Helen is dead. Francis retrieves his belongings from their suitcase, takes the three dollars and seventy-five cents she had in her coat, then sits on the bed and stares at her. He recalls that she once told him that she wanted to be buried with her family, with a headstone bearing her name. Bums are never buried with headstones, and Francis knows that whoever takes charge of her body won't give her one. He vows to find her someday, rebury her properly, and give her a glowing headstone. He wants to pray for her soul, but is unable to pray even for his own. He walks out into the night. By dawn, he is on a boxcar heading south.

The ghost of Strawberry Bill, a bum Francis once knew who had been buried in a mass pauper's grave, climbs into the boxcar and asks Francis what he's running from this time. Francis tells him he's running from the cops, for beating the Legionnaire the night before. Strawberry Bill tells him that Francis is kidding himself; there are no cops after him. In fact, no one is after him. By lunchtime, Francis is back in Annie's kitchen, eating a sandwich and drinking tea. She puts curtains on the windows so if the police are looking for him, they won't find him. That night he lies on a cot in the attic, wondering if the law is after him. He thinks to himself that if it turns out that they're not, he will ask Annie to set up his cot in Danny's room. It's a nice room. He can see himself living there.

Chapter 7 Analysis

After the false start of the day before, Francis has returned home for good. Helen's death conveniently leaves him free to return to his wife and family. He is a creature of old habits, however, and instead of returning right away, he puts himself in a position to kill another man, forcing himself to go on the run again. He could have spent the night at the mission or at the flophouse where he'd already paid for the room. It would have meant the world to Helen if he had spent her final night on earth with her in their shared room. Francis turned down every one of these options, preferring to spend the night in the dangerous jungle. By placing himself in the path of danger, he gave himself an excuse to be violent, and another reason to run. Fortunately, Francis' conscience, in the form of the ghost of Strawberry Bill, appears to remind him of his choices. He can run away and wind up buried in a mass grave like Strawberry Bill, or he can return home and one day be buried in his rightful grave next to his wife. With Strawberry Bill, the author continues his running analogy of gravesites. The story began at Gerald's grave,

and ends with Francis choosing not to die alone and be buried in a pauper's grave like Strawberry Bill. The grave analogy is appropriate for a restless soul like Francis. Death symbolizes, for Francis, being at rest. The place where he dies, and is buried, will be the sum of his existence. So in the end, Francis chooses to return home, to be buried with his family with a proper headstone.

The fundamental turning point in Francis, which allows him to return home, is actually his growing understanding of the events surrounding the trolley strike. In this final chapter, Francis is able to see the political and social undercurrents that led him to throw the first stone. It was this stone which made Francis a killer, and having been unable, at the time, to see that he was a pawn in a grand game, Francis simply began to believe that he was a killer at heart; a no-good, violent man who didn't deserve to live amongst decent folk. That definition, which Francis accepted whole-heartedly, had been the root cause of his isolation, and left him forever feeling the need to run away. So, ironically, although Francis' problem has often seemed to be that he refused to take responsibility for his actions, it is revealed at the end that the cause of his downfall was that he accepted a greater responsibility than was his due. Francis believed himself to be single-handedly responsible for the strike and its violent outcome. This excessive acceptance of responsibility, and his subsequent refusal to discuss it with anyone or consider any other viewpoint, shows Francis to be a narcissistic man. He believed that the world revolved around him, and if he is a bad man, the world can not continue with him in it. His tremendous ego led him to take full responsibility for the outcome of the strike, and set him on a path to destroy everything and everyone good in his life. His self-punishment is revealed as a consequence of his monstrous ego, especially since he didn't bother to look at the damage his self-destruction was causing others. There is hope for Francis at last, however. His ability to see himself as a pawn in a political game of social politics, demonstrates that he is capable of transcending his ego and rejoining the human race.

Characters

Francis Aloysius Phelan

Francis Phelan is one of those faces we pass on the streets. Sometimes we look away, sometimes we offer money, but always we feel grateful for our homes and our bank accounts, and the fact that we are not the ones forced to wander the mean streets alone. Rarely do we think any more deeply about our homeless population than that. Author William Kennedy has written an entire novel devoted to a homeless character. Through Francis, he shows us that homeless people are every bit as emotionally complex as the rest of society. Francis' character is developed respectfully. He is shown as a man capable of independent thought and decision-making, who has simply made some bad decisions for all the wrong reasons. This is something that could happen to any of us, and the novel touches a nerve in its readership by showing just how close we all are to leading a life like Francis.'

The brilliance of Kennedy's portrait of Francis is that he proves Francis' value to society. There are people who believe that vagrants are worthless because they don't contribute anything to the economy. Ironically, it is Francis' lack of contribution which proves his value. It is not just money that is missed when Francis drops out of society; it is Francis himself who is missed by his loved ones. His departure leaves a hole in the fabric of his family, which shows just how valuable his contribution would have been, had he chosen to make it. Francis leaves because he believes himself worthless, beyond redemption. His daughter, Peggy, forced to grow up without a father, is only too conscious of the value he could have contributed to her life. The same can be said of his wife, Annie, who has been deprived of love, romance, and sexuality by the absence of her husband, whom she still loves and remains loyal to through twenty-two years of abandonment. Surely a man so deeply loved as Francis, must have great value. The tragedy of his character is that he denies his own value, and in so doing, denies his loved ones what they needed the most - his love and support.

Helen Archer

A lost soul in search of love. Helen was loved by her father before he passed away. Her cruel mother loved only Helen's brother, Patrick, who grew up to believe that he was better than his Helen. When her father dies and her mother steals her inheritance, Helen is left with nothing and no one; not even her brother returns her calls. Forced to abandon her college studies and hopes of a singing career, Helen takes a job in a music store, where she soon seeks solace in the arms of its proprietor, Arthur. Arthur is Helen's first true love, but only in the sense that she loves him truly. He is a married man who squanders her youth and eventually dumps her for a younger mistress. Helen, driven by an addiction to love that she mistakes for love itself, would have done anything for Arthur, even though his actions prove that he never really loved her. After he dumps her,

she experiments with dating other men, but she is considered too old for a husband, and therefore none of these brief relationships become serious.

However when Helen meets Francis, she again falls in love. Helen's form of love means loving another person at the expense of herself. Francis is the perfect mate for a woman like Helen, because he is already married, but having abandoned his wife, is free to engage in a long-term relationship with Helen, who is beyond thoughts of marriage at this point. He also tests her resolve to put love above anything else in her life by giving into his alcoholism and becoming a street bum. Helen chooses to follow him into this life, always with the hope of saving him and restoring them to the domestic harmony they experienced in earlier days. Helen hates what she has become because of Francis, but never blames him for it. She prides herself on her ability to love so deeply that she will put up with anything to stand by her man. If she had a different definition of love, in which love involved both giving and receiving, she would never have become a vagrant. Her story is sad because Helen believes she has given over her entire life to love, but in reality, she doesn't understand what love is, or that she's never had it in its truest, and best form.

Katrina Daugherty

Francis' first love. Katrina was a sexual predator dressed in sheep's clothing. Just like the famous Mrs. Robinson, she systematically corrupted and seduced young Francis. She treated her young love slave like gold, feeding him lobster and teaching him the erotic arts. Because of this fine treatment, Francis never consciously realized the wrong she'd done him. Many children and young teenagers who are sexually abused by more experienced adults do not realize that the relationship is not voluntary. Katrina caught Francis in her web before he was of age to contend with a woman of her years and experience. He was likely mature enough - or nearly mature enough - to handle having sex with a girl his own age, with similar life experience, but Francis was in way over his head with the worldly Katrina. She turned him into an adulterer and a sex object, where a similar relationship with a girl his own age might have turned him into a man. Additionally, she instilled in him a sense of shame and secrecy about sex, for both she and Francis would have been ruined if their small town had learned about their relationship. The expensive shirt she forced him to wear was a form of controlling him by subtly threatening to expose their secret. Even by the end of the novel, Francis has not quite understood what happened between him and Katrina, but his review of their time together did help him lay the groundwork for remembering the sweet, pure love he once shared with Annie.

Martin Daugherty

The son of Katrina Dougherty. Martin grows up to be a newspaperman, like his cuckolded father, and remains a staunch supporter of the Phelan family.

Iron Joe Farrell

Francis' father-in-law. Iron Joe ran the water filtration plant and was much admired by the local citizenry, especially Francis, who looked up to the man. It was partly Iron Joe's influence that prompted Francis to become an underground hero for the cause of big labor. Only towards the end of the novel does Francis realize the older man and his cohorts had sacrificed Francis for their own ideals. When Francis finally realizes the negative influence Iron Joe had on his youthful psyche, he is able to put his violence into context; a younger man wishing to prove himself heroic to the man who taught him that violence was heroic. It was Iron Joe who made Francis a killer. This realization shows the reader than Francis is beginning to look at his life from a larger perspective, and inspires the hope that Francis will be able to forgive himself.

Michael Phelan

Francis' father. Francis has nothing but pleasant memories of his gregarious, popular father. Unfortunately, all of those memories have been overshadowed by the memory of Michael's death, for which Francis feels responsible. As young Francis brought his father lunch at the railyard where Michael worked, Michael was hit by a train and killed.

Kathryn Phelan

Francis' mother. A judgmental and cold woman, Francis' hatred for Kathryn contributes to his hatred for women in general. Her bitter dislike of sex may have contributed to Francis' later sexual exploits and his overall lack of respect for his sex partners. Only much later in life is Francis capable of feeling some empathy for his mother, when he realizes that she was a victim of strict religious conditioning which had thoroughly convinced her that if she enjoyed making love with her husband she would go to hell.

Gerald Phelan

Francis' unlucky infant son, who was born on the thirteenth and died thirteen days later, when Francis accidentally let him slip through his diaper, falling fatally to the floor. Guilt over Gerald's death prompted Francis to leave his family.

Marcus Gorman

Francis' attorney. He gets the charges against Francis thrown out on a technicality. This was fortunate for Francis, who was actually guilty of registering twenty-one times to vote. Gorman reduces his normal five-hundred dollar charge to fifty dollars because a mutual friend, Martin Dougherty, asks Gorman to give Francis a break. However, despite the fact that Francis is an unemployed vagrant, Gorman insists he repay the fifty dollars, and even helps Francis get a job at the cemetery. This job coincidentally brings

Francis to the gravesite of his youngest son, where, by confronting the boy's death, Francis embarks on a path to redemption.

Rudy

Francis' friend, a fellow bum. Rudy attempts to make a personal connection with Francis, but Francis is not interested in letting anybody get close to him. Francis cares about Rudy in his own way, and avenges his death by killing his murderer.

Oscar Reo

A former drinking buddy of Francis. Before Oscar Reo became an alcoholic, he had been a famous radio crooner. When Francis meets up with him again, he has dried out and has found steady employment as a singing bartender in The Gilded Cage.

Pee Wee

The manager of the Methodist Mission, Francis' old friend, and formerly a bum himself. Pee Wee has changed his vagrant, alcoholic ways, but in the process has come to share Reverend Chester's judgmental attitudes towards the homeless.

Aldo Campione

The escaped horse thief Francis tries to save after the trolley strike. The escaped prisoner and his partner had run off in the confusion caused by the strike, and tried to escape in the same train that Francis hopped after killing the scab. Francis risked gunfire to give Aldo a hand, but Aldo was shot and killed before Francis could pull him aboard.

Fiddler Quain

The ghost Francis confronts in Chapter VI. Fiddler had been the man who helped Francis set fire to the bedsheets on the day of the trolley strike. For his actions, the police had bashed in Fiddler's skull, and his sister Martha never forgave Francis for drawing her brother into the violence.

Harold Allen

The scab trolley conductor whom Francis killed in the strike of 1901. Francis confronts him, as a ghost, in 1938.

Objects/Places

Annie's House

Francis' marital home in Albany. When he returns after twenty-two years, he finds his wife and children living there, still awaiting his return.

Chadwick Park

The baseball stadium in Albany, New York, where Francis played to an appreciative crowd in better days.

Jack and Clara's Apartment

The home of Jack and Clara, two social misfits on the edge of homelessness themselves. Jack and Clara occasionally take in vagrants like Helen and Francis in exchange for sexual favors.

Palombo's Hotel

The seedy dive which is the closest thing to a home that Francis and Helen have. When money allows them to rent a room, they always request the same room. Helen's goal throughout the final two days of her life is to return "home" to the Palombo with Francis. Sadly in the end she returns alone, and dies alone, in the room they had so often shared.

Saint Agnes Cemetery

The cemetery where Francis Phelan's family is buried. At the beginning of the novel, he obtains a day-laborer job which takes him back to revisit the ghosts of his past, buried at Saint Agnes.' He visits his dead infant's grave and makes peace with the accident that cost him his son. This visit is the beginning of his journey back home, where he eventually learns that his wife, who still considers him part of the family, has purchased a burial site for Francis in the Phelan plot.

Saint Anthony's Catholic Church

The church where Helen attends services on the final day of her life.

The Carbarns

Francis once worked at the carbarns, servicing the trolleys that ran the city streets. Trolleys, however, have begun to go out of fashion by 1938 when the novel takes place, and the carbarns are now closed down and deserted.

The Gilded Cage

The name of the bar where Oscar Reo works. Once a famous radio star, he is now days reduced to the role of a singing bartender at the Gilded Cage. Nonetheless, he is doing much better than his old friend Francis, for at least Oscar has a paying job and a home.

The Jungle

A dangerous, hidden homeless city. Filled with lean-tos and other makeshift shelters, vagrants from all over the city call this place home. It is here where the raiders arrive to attack and drive out the bums, attracted perhaps by the abundance of helpless victims whom they can terrify.

The Methodist Mission

The homeless shelter managed by Pee Wee under the guidance of the loveless Reverend Chester. Chester is a do-gooder who believes he is helping others, but actually he's a judgmental man who would rather let a drunken woman freeze to death outside his homeless shelter than allow her to come in out of the cold.

Social Concerns And Themes

Several social concerns immediately visible in Ironweed involve Depression Era Albany as well as contemporary society. There is the corruption at the heart of urban politics which draws the protagonist, Francis Phelan, back to his native city in order to collect five dollars for each of the twenty-one times he registers to vote. There is the ideological clash between capitalistic management and labor unions, as when, in 1901, the young Francis, a fervid union supporter, threw a stone and killed a scab during the Albany trolley car strike, thus launching him on the first of his many flights to escape punishment. There is the plight of society's dropouts, derelicts whose only hope beckons from the depths of a bottle of dago red, a plight explored from the inside-out so that what many consider the dregs of humanity are no longer a faceless multitude but emerge as a crowd of individuals with a past which explains their present existence while holding little hope for the future.

Ultimately, however, these social issues are but the background Kennedy provides as a context for characterization, the social milieu subordinated to the portrait of the individual casting about for survival within a maelstrom of forces he must confront and attempt to understand if he is to survive. Thus, social concerns and themes are so inextricably woven into the fabric of the narrative that efforts to extract and follow the various thematic threads will necessarily reduce the elaborate configuration of the whole to the main lines of its emblematic design. Still, in a novel as complex as Ironweed, an understanding of the several major recurrent themes will provide an essential basis for further study of the work.

The narrative of Ironweed follows two days of events as filtered for the most part through the mind of Francis Phelan, an aging derelict who deserted his Albany family in 1916 when his infant son died after accidentally slipping from the diaper Francis grasped while lifting the baby. Now, in 1938, Francis's return involves a confrontation with his family and with his other son, Billy Phelan — a thirty-one-old hustler on Albany's Broadway strip. As the novel slowly progresses toward this confrontation, Kennedy's concern with the father-son relationship becomes one of the novel's most important themes, supported by an Abraham-Isaac Biblical motif as well as by flashbacks which show Francis's own affiliation with his father and his subsequent admiration of the famous playwright Edward Daugherty, whose idealism propels the young Francis into throwing the fateful stone during the trolley strike. Without a father, yet psychologically needing a figure to revere, both Francis and Billy are thrust into a quest, with the American culture becoming a figurative labyrinth of avenues and endless alleys where both success and failure coexist.

But the modus operandi of Ironweed is such that one theme is extracted only to reveal the more subterranean roots of another. As Francis Phelan examines his own guilt as a father, the novel becomes a study in retrospect, questioning to what extent the past determines the present and must then determine the future. Like the Greek tragedians before him, Kennedy speculates on human consciousness caught within the intricate web of both earthly and cosmic forces: the relationship of father-son expands to the

relationship between fate and free will. Thus, Francis recognizes the various "reasons" (killing a scab, accidentally killing his son) which have propelled him into a perpetual flight, accepts his present existence as punishment for past sins, but then must also wonder whether the concept of Grace might exist at the earthly level beyond the fairy-tale and Biblical exploits of heroes.

Techniques

Kennedy's manipulation of the narrative chronology is a technique of central importance in Ironweed. On a first reading of the novel, many will be surprised to realize that the actual events take place during only two days: October 31 (Halloween or the eve of All Saints' Day) when supernatural spirits or specters of the dead are said to walk among the living; and November 1 (All Saints' Day) which involves the celebration of departed saints.

(When considering Kennedy's use of the past-present-future theme in this structural context, one should keep in mind that November 2 is All Souls' Day, which involves prayer for the mercy of the souls in Purgatory.) This dichotomy between death and rebirth becomes the basis of the novel's structure, the first three chapters set during October 31 when various spirits such as the scab conductor and a derelict Francis killed to protect his .own life rise from the grave to visit him and discuss the past. The following three chapters occur on November 1 and include Francis's return home to his family as he brings with him a turkey which his wife cooks to celebrate the occasion. The final chapter also occurs on November 1 when Francis and Rudy visit the "jungle" community of derelicts, this scene culminating with Francis's heroic attempt to save the mortally wounded Rudy. Near the end, the early morning hours of November 2, the novel switches to the subjunctive mood, implying the future wherein Francis finds Helen dead, and projects his own departure from Albany; yet the novel concludes with Francis's thoughts of returning home. Recognizing this chronology and contingent structure of the novel is essential for an understanding of the theme of sin and possible redemption that Kennedy pursues throughout.

Another device which lends particular brilliance to the novel is the use of a stream of consciousness narrative, a device by which Kennedy focuses on the consciousness of Francis Phelan as the protagonist connects his present experience to the past through a series of retrogressive thoughts. More specifically, Kennedy uses the technique of an indirect interior monologue, emphasizing the mind of Francis but also shifting occasionally to the minds of other characters. As a result of this technique, the novel's focus is firmly psychological; that is, the external events and plot of the novel are subordinated to the interior mental experience of the characters. The use of such a device, of course, results in a narrative fiction which places the burden of interpretation squarely on the reader since the author merely "presents" the consciousness of the characters but does not himself provide overt commentary of the narrative's significance. In fact, writers who have chosen to use this technique are generally considered "difficult"; James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, and William Faulkner have, indeed, attracted much critical attention because their fiction allows for a great diversity of interpretation.

Kennedy also uses an elaborate web of imagery that becomes a leit motif throughout the narrative. One can trace many individual recurrent images throughout the story: there is the image of the "weed" that reflects the particular resilience characteristic of the "ironweed" of the title and characteristic also of the derelict Francis Phelan; there is

the hero image as seen in Francis's participation in the union strike, his career in major league baseball, and his subsequent attempts to rescue his friends. But ultimately the one underlying image derives from the flight motif that characterizes the protagonist who has so often used flight as a means to escape, rather than confront, situations emanating from acts of free will. In this way, Ironweed explores like Greek tragedy the existential conundrum of whether man is inextricably caught in the cosmic forces of fate or whether he may, through use of free will, create his future. As Francis visits his family, this central concern of the novel is captured in the "mysterious" newspaper photo showing a young nineteen-year-old Francis throwing a baseball to another player: The camera has caught the image of the ball as it is held in Francis's hand, but also caught the image of the ball in mid-air as it arcs toward the catcher's hand. In pondering the clipping, Francis reaches an epiphany wherein he understands that while the ball is in one sense destined to be caught by the catcher, in another sense it has not yet been caught: "The ball still flies." It is this central image which most precisely expresses the essence of the novel at its many levels.

Themes

Home

The concept of home is so integral to the human condition that countless authors have explored this theme in their work. William Kennedy chooses to explore the theme by writing about the homeless. It is an interesting and unusual juxtaposition of themes, which adds great value to the vast literary body of work about the importance of Home. What is most interesting is his decision to show Francis Phelan and Helen Archer as human beings capable of deciding the direction of their lives. The public debate over homelessness usually involves discussing whether vagrants are homeless due to their own choices, or through circumstances beyond their control. Kennedy comes squarely down on the side of personal responsibility, and yet, surprisingly given his stance on the matter, he creates characters who are whole and complex beings with whom the readership can sympathize. Kennedy seems to believe that homelessness is a choice, and yet he communicates his further belief that it is a choice made out of desperation, when all other choices appear unbearable. He creates a dignity in his characters, and helps his readers understand what sort of events might lead a person to choose a rootless, homeless life as the lesser of two evils.

Sexuality and Survival

William Kennedy's novel, *Ironweed*, enters unusual terrain with his thoughtful exploration of the relationship between sex and survival in the world of the homeless. Ultimately, the only thing we own in this world are our bodies. For street people like Helen and Francis, their bodies are the only thing of value that they have to trade for a night's shelter. Yet Kennedy distinguishes this barter for survival from prostitution. Helen prides herself on never in her life having profited financially from having sex with a man. She never even let her dates buy her dinner when she was a young woman; she always went dutch. Later in life, when she's homeless, she never profits from the sex she trades for shelter. Kennedy makes it clear that Helen, and women like her, trade sex only out of the need to survive on the streets, implying that a refusal on Helen's part would likely result in a beating, or worse. This makes the sex for survival trade tantamount to rape, for if Helen ever said no to a man on the streets, she would have likely wound up spending the night underneath the man anyway, against her will. By "agreeing" to sex, Helen is at best preserving the illusion of choice. For her to accept that she truly had no choice would be the death of her surviving human dignity, and would have ended her hopeful belief that she might, one day, break away from the street life. So Helen agrees to the sex with men she doesn't desire as much for her emotional survival as for her physical survival. By voluntarily submitting, when indeed she has no choice, she saves herself the additional trauma of having to admit she's been violated.

Religion

Religion, particularly Catholicism, plays a large, if understated, role in the events of the novel. Francis Phelan's hatred of women began with his hatred for his unloving mother, Kathryn, whom he refers to as a cold fish-wife. Francis' father was such a likeable man, that Francis took Kathryn's rejection of Michael personally. Although Kathryn never considered leaving Michael, their marriage bed was a cold one due to Kathryn's beliefs that sex was a mortal sin. Francis could hear her through the thin walls of his room as she resentfully submitted to her husband's caresses after first lecturing him on the immorality of sex. Francis is only able to begin to forgive his mother many years later when he realizes that her coldness was caused by fear, a fear the Catholic Church had indoctrinated in her. Catholicism taught many young boys and girls that sexual relations would damn them to an eternity of fire and brimstone in the pits of hell. Children, being malleable, often carried these unhealthy fears into adulthood, and, as in the case of Kathryn, into their marriage beds.

But Catholicism also lends a positive hand to Francis. The Catholic view of marriage as being a life-long partnership prevented his wife, Annie, from ever divorcing Francis or taking a lover during the long twenty-two years of his absence. Although she denies, when he asks her, that religion kept her faithful, claiming it was her love for Francis, it is reasonable to assume that her upbringing had a major hand in her continuing loyalty to her husband. The fact that she is willing to take him back when returns after two decades of abandonment must be related to her strict Catholic beliefs as well. Once a wife, always a wife, as Annie demonstrates when she tells Francis that she's purchased a burial plot for him next to her own in the Catholic cemetery of Saint Agnes. As a Catholic wife, she has no trouble opening her arms and her home to her prodigal husband.

Style

Point of View

The story is told through the omniscient eyes of an unacknowledged third person narrator. This narrator disguises himself most often as Francis, but flits briefly into the minds of the other characters, and there is even one notable chapter told entirely from Helen's point of view. Despite the fact that *Ironweed* is Francis' story, told mainly from his point of view, the author found it necessary to relate events through an omniscient third person. The need for this omniscient narrator stems from Francis' lack of insight into himself, and general unreliability as a narrator. Francis has repressed most of his past memories, both the pleasant and the painful, and by telling the story largely through his eyes, the author achieves his goal of putting the reader into his confused shoes, which helps create empathy for Francis' plight. We get occasional help from the omniscient narrator, who helps us to understand that Francis' point of view is often self-serving. As the novel progresses, Francis, begins to understand that his point of view must broaden to encompass certain important realizations. The author brings other characters into the mix in the form of ghosts, which help Francis unearth his suppressed memories and reach important conclusions about his life. The ghosts are a wonderful artistic whimsy on the part of the author, and they have the very real effect of helping Francis to face his past and ultimately, to stop taking refuge in denial.

Setting

Both time and location are important in the setting of *Ironweed.* William Kennedy has written a period piece set in 1938 America, which also covers, through flashback, the years 1901 through 1938. Francis Phelan is fifty-eight years old in 1938, which puts his birth year in 1880. The flashbacks don't begin until 1901, when Francis was twenty-one years old and killed a man during a labor strike. This was a pivotal moment in his life, and since the book begins with Francis, in 1938, embarking on a path to redemption, it is fitting that the flashbacks begin in 1901, on the crucial day that began Francis' fall from grace. The social undercurrents of unrest, which marked the beginning of the labor strike, helped shape Francis' life. In many ways, he was a victim of his era, and would live out the majority of his life in humble expiation of the sins he committed on that day.

The years in between 1901 and 1938 would bring America into the Great Depression, a time when many men and women became homeless through circumstances beyond their control. Francis had already been homeless for thirteen years by the time Black Friday arrived to mark the beginning of the Depression. By beginning Francis' homelessness before the Depression, the author seems to be indicating that Francis was indeed responsible for his own destiny. Yet the political battle between labor unions and big business, which was prevalent in turn of the century America, did contribute to Francis' broken spirit, and so the author manages, through the judicious use of American history, to share the blame equally for Francis' homelessness between

Francis himself and the forces of history which acted upon his life. The physical location of the story highlights the importance of these historical forces, as Albany, New York was then and remains today the seat of much political power. As a denizen of Albany, Francis was subject to greater politicalforces than if he'd lived in any other, less powerful city or town.

Language and Meaning

The language in *Ironweed* is appropriate to the characters' station in life, as well as to the era in which they live. The author, William Kennedy, prides himself on his ability to write appropriate dialogue for his characters. He believes that if a writer makes a businessman and a street bum sound the same, it's a mark of poor writing. Kennedy ensures that the words that issue from his character's mouths are fitting to their lifestyles. Hence, much of *Ironweed* is ungrammatical, and full of street slang. Since his protagonist is a vagabond, the author has carefully crafted the dialogue to make sure he sounds like a vagabond.

However, this does not mean that Kennedy's prose is equally low-brow. For William Kennedy believes in challenging his readers by using the full spectrum of vocabulary at his command. The third person omniscient narrator, usually disguising himself in the thoughts of the characters, delivers lengthy, poetic sentences, which utilize a loftier form of prose than the characters would ever actually speak. Such is the nature of Kennedy's gift that this high-flying prose meshes seamlessly with the low banter of his characters.

Structure

The story is divided into seven chapters, each of approximately equal length. The plot is layered by time and symbolism. On the surface, it is a linear plot, which spans a period of three days in the life of Francis Phelan. The three days are broken up by memories and flashbacks encompassing thirty-seven years of Francis' personal history, which provides a second and deeper layer to the story. Structurally, the plot tells the entire story of Francis' homeless years, beginning with the fateful day in 1901 when he first went on the run from the law, and ending with the day in 1938 when he finally returns home for good. The third layer is one of symbolism; the story is book-ended front and back by a graveyard, the Phelan family resting place in Saint Agnes' Cemetery. It opens with Francis' first visit to his dead son's grave, and ends with his wife's admission that she still considers Francis a part of the family and has even bought him a burial plot next to hers in Saint Agnes.' In between the bookends, the author adds depth to this symbolic layer by populating his story with ghosts from Francis' past, who show up, of course, around Halloween, in order to force him to confront his past. There is a fourth and final layer to the story, which the author does not directly mention; William Kennedy, through his well-drawn human characters, inspires the reader to take away from the story an appreciation of human frailty, strength, failure and triumph.

Quotes

"Francis felt healthy and he liked it. It's too bad he didn't feel healthy when he drank. He felt good then but not healthy, especially not in the morning, or when he woke up in the middle of the night, say. Sometimes he felt dead." Chapter I, pg. 8

"He flew and then fell in a broken pile, and Francis ran to him, the first at his side. Francis looked for a way to straighten the angular body but feared any move, and so he pulled off his own sweater and pillowed his father's head with it. So many people go crooked when they die." Chapter I, pg. 15

"Your mother said two words, 'Sweet Jesus,' and then we both crouched down to snatch you up. But we both stopped in that crouch because of the looks of you. Billy come in then and saw you. 'Why is Gerald crooked?'" Chapter I, pg. 19

"Francis, oh sad man, was her last great love, but he wasn't her only one. Helen has had a lifetime of sadnesses with her lovers. Her first true love kept her in his fierce embrace for years, but then he loosened that embrace and let her slide down and down until the hope within her died. Hopeless Helen, that's who she was when she met Francis. And as she stepped up to the microphone on the stage of The Gilded Cage, hearing the piano behind her, Helen was a living explosion of unbearable memory and indomitable joy." Chapter II, pg. 55

"Clara thinks you're a temptation to Jack. The way I figure, if I give her some attention she won't worry about you, but you're so goddamn boisterous." Chapter III, pg. 83

"His mother would be in purgatory, probably for goddamn ever. She wasn't evil enough for hell, shrew of shrews that she was, denier of life. But he couldn't see her ever getting a foot into heaven either, if they ever got such a place." Chapter III, pg. 90

"Because he was the firstborn, Francis' room was next to theirs, and so he had heard their nocturnal rumblings for years; and he well knew how she perennially resister her husband. When Michael would finally overcome her, either by force of will or by threatening to take their case to the priest, Francis would hear her gurgles of resentment, her moans of anguish, her eternal arguments about the sinfulness of all but generative couplings." Chapter IV, pg. 98

"He tried so hard for so long, harder and longer than you could ever imagine, Finny, but all it did was hurt Helen to see it. It didn't hurt Helen physically because that part of her is so big now, and so old, that nothing can ever hurt her there anymore." Chapter V, pg. 129

"There was no way he could reveal all that had brought him here. It would have meant the recapitulation not only of all is sins but of all his fugitive and fallen dreams, all his random movement across the country and back, all his returns to this city only to leave again without ever coming to see her, them, without ever knowing why he didn't. It

would have meant the anatomizing of his compulsive violence and his fear of justice, of his time with Helen, his present defection from Helen, his screwing so many women he really wanted nothing to do with, his drunken ways, his morning-after sicknesses, his sleeping in the weeds, his bumming money from strangers not because there was a depression but first to help Helen and then because it was easy: easier than working." Chapter VI, pg. 160

"Helen would be out of it, whipped all to hell by fatigue and worry. Damn worrywart is what she is. But not Annie. Annie, she don't worry. Annie knows how to live." Chapter VII, pg. 196

"You must come again. Sure, said Francis. No, said Annie, I mean that you must come so that we can talk about the things you ought to know, things about the children and about the family. There's a cot we could set up in Danny's room if you wanted to stay over next time. And she then kissed him ever so lightly on the lips." Chapter VII, pg. 212

"In the deepest part of himself that could draw an unutterable conclusion, he told himself: My guilt is all that I have left. If I lose it, I have stood for nothing, done nothing, been nothing." Chapter VII, pg. 216

Adaptations

Director Hector Babenco cast Jack Nicholson and Meryl Streep in the lead roles of the 1987 Hollywood adaptation of Ironweed, and he superbly captured the grinding, hand-to-mouth dreariness of the story. The script showcases the two actors, and Streep's performance is considered to be among her best.

Topics for Discussion

Do you believe Helen became a vagrant because of Francis, or was there something within her which led her to that lifestyle? Explain your position.

Why do you think Annie was so willing to take Francis back?

Do you think that Francis is a man capable of feeling love? Can you think of any actions he took during the story which demonstrated love?

Do you believe William Kennedy's portrait of the homeless life is accurate? Why or why not?

What impact do you think Francis' affair with Katrina had on his life?

Which of Francis' crimes do you feel was the worst? Why?

In what ways has Francis changed by the end of the novel?

Literary Precedents

Although Kennedy's fame is so recent that no extended analyses of the individual works yet exist, Ironweed will undoubtedly be discussed by future critics as a novel wherein its American setting figures strongly into the fiction. Like Faulkner's Mississippi and Steinbeck's California, Kennedy's fiction grows from the soil of an American region — the New York capital with its Irish Catholic politics of the 1930s, the contingent corruption of that era, and the American dreams and nightmares generated by what William Carlos Williams termed "the American grain."

Yet Ironweed is more accurately placed within a larger tradition: its use of place as the immediate point of departure for a mythic exploration of the human mind. In this context, Kennedy is the descendent of writers such as Joyce, Proust, Woolf, and Faulkner; he persistently explores the dimensions of human consciousness, uses a deftly controlled interior monologue to emphasize the psychological import of the novel as a genre, and employs a tightly controlled structure to support the thematic significance of the fiction. If seen in this vein, Kennedy takes his place among such contemporary British and American writers as William Golding, Lawrence Durrell, Ken Kesey, and Jerzy Kosinski who persistently explore the problems of how the individual exists within the context of a technological society that would reduce human awareness to the level of logical responses. Like these authors, Kennedy pursues the mysteries of human consciousness, its rational potential as well as its less demonstrable spiritual potential. In this tradition of contemporary fiction, what might well be called a "literature of consciousness," Kennedy is an advocate of mystery, an explorer of the mind, a writer concerned less with the "what" of existence than the "how" of it.

Related Titles

In a sense, one might say that a full understanding of Ironweed is predicated on a reading of the earlier novels. The young Francis Phelan's participation in the trolley strike is more clearly understood after reading The Ink Truck (1969) wherein the protagonist, Bailey, gains heroic dimension as the idealistic union protester whom the reader follows through various apparently ineffective although ultimately victorious acts. But it was with the second novel, Legs (1975) that Kennedy began to draw fictive portraits of characters who overtly resided in the real city of Albany and whose paths overlapped much like those of characters Faulkner created in his Yoknapatawpha novels.

Thus, Legs Diamond's lawyer, Marcus, a central figure in Legs, is referred to in Billy Phelan's Greatest Game (1978) and Ironweed (1983) as the lawyer who successfully defends Francis against the charge of illegal voter registration.

Francis Phelan is briefly referred to in Legs and appears several times in Billy Phelan's Greatest Game. Billy and Martin Daugherty are the central characters in Billy Phelan's Greatest Game and reappear in Ironweed. In addition, the interweaving of characters also extends to a similar interweaving of events such as the trial of Legs Diamond, Francis's participation in the trolley strike, and the kidnap of Charlie Boy McCall.

Added to the Albany setting, the overlap of characters and events, the novels preceding Ironweed (while quite different in structure and the author's manipulation of point of view) are similar in their thematic concern with the individual and the possibility for heroic action. In The Ink Truck, Bailey consistently refuses to compromise his integrity and chooses instead to risk his life rather than acquiesce to the prevailing corruption around him.

Similarly, Legs Diamond and his lawyer question not so much the nature of heroism, but the way in which the American public demands and creates its heroes, applauding and reviling them in one gesture so ambiguous that the American consciousness becomes the true focus of the second novel. In Billy Phelan's Greatest Game, Billy's moral dilemma — as he is caught in the squeeze between the prevailing political power and his own individual perceptions of appropriate conduct — is augmented and heightened by the elder Martin Daugherty, who also struggles to understand the moral implications of his own past and present conduct. Reaching backward to the past as a means of exploring the present and future, the novels preceding Ironweed provide valuable insight into characterization and event as well as Kennedy's method of dramatization.

The sixth novel in the Albany cycle, The Flaming Corsage (1996), begins in 1908 and backtracks to the mid-1880s to tell the story of two characters who appear in early novels: Edward Daugherty, first introduced in Billy Phelan's Greatest Game, and Katrina Selene Taylor, who was briefly Francis Phelan's lover in Ironweed. Edward is a brilliant and attractive young writer from an Irish working-class family, who falls in love with the socially elite Katrina.

Edward and Katrina are caught in a hotel fire; an elevator explodes, impaling Katrina with a stick, and fatally wounding her father and sister. Her dresses catches on fire, which Edward manages to suppress through an act of courage. The couple never recovers from this incident, and Katrina blames herself for the destruction of her family. The predominant theme which emerges is that your past inevitably catches up with you, particularly if you try to deny it. By haunting Edward with the presence of one Thomas Myogen, a cynical companion from his youth who never gives up trying to destroy him, Kennedy is saying that something about the Irish past is dark and destructive, even if one believes, as Edward does, in the aristocracy of a lost ancestral world. All of the promising people end up as badly as possible, with the corsage of their bright hopes gone up in flames.

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