Jailbird Study Guide

Jailbird by Kurt Vonnegut

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Plot Summary

This thematically and narratively complex book tells the life story of Walter Starbuck, ex-socialist, ex-capitalist, and ex-con. Moving fluidly back and forth between past and present, incident and insight, irony and irony, the novel explores themes relating to the tension between capitalism and communism, layers of meaning inherent in layers of identity, fact, and fiction, and the interconnectedness of all things.

The novel begins with a lengthy prologue written in the character of the author and ostensibly a summary of the novel's historical origins. While some elements of what is described here are obviously real, others are just as obviously fictionalized, giving the early (and clear) sense that the lines between what is fiction and what is fact are, in this book at least, quite blurred.

The narrative proper begins with the protagonist, the elderly Walter Starbuck, in prison. As he waits for the guard to conduct him out the gates, he reflects upon several important aspects of his past: his intensely loving relationship with his wife Ruth, his involvement with the Watergate scandal (the circumstances of which being what brought him to prison), and his lifelong attraction to both socialism and capitalism. He also reflects on the meaning and ramifications of a key incident in his life: his offering the name of an ex-friend to a committee investigating the presence of communism in 1950s America.

Upon his release from prison, Starbuck has a series of encounters with individuals who treat him with evident, sometimes surprising kindness. These encounters are described with references to The RAMJAC Corporation, an omnipresent and highly profitable business conglomerate; in other words, an embodiment of capitalism. Eventually Starbuck arrives in New York City, where he lived as a capitalistically inclined young man and where he had his first actual encounters with both women and socialism. One of those women, Mary Kathleen O'Looney, became both his lover and his socialist inspiration. She returns to his life as an old woman, still devoted to the cause of socialism but several decades older, several degrees more deranged, and several billion dollars richer. As the result of her marriage, she is in fact the head of the infinitely wealthy RAMJAC Corporation.

A narrow escape from the law allows Starbuck and Mary Kathleen rekindle their long dormant relationship. At the same time, Starbuck also re-encounters the ex-friend he betrayed decades earlier, and is surprised to discover that he (Starbuck) has been forgiven by both the friend and by Mary Kathleen (who, Starbuck says in narration, he dumped because she wasn't high class enough). Soon after their reunion, however, the mad Mary Kathleen is hit by a taxi and dies. In her last moments, however, she is sane enough to do three things: gently confront Starbuck with an important truth about himself; tell him where her will is; and reveal that her will leaves everything she owns (including RAMJAC) to the people of America. After her death, Starbuck conceals the will and accepts a full time job at RAMJAC (which, as he himself says, would have fallen apart if the will had been found and Mary Kathleen's wishes adhered to). A series of

coincidences, however, brings the will (and Starbuck's involvement in its concealment) to light. This results in Starbuck losing his job, in RAMJAC being dissolved, in Starbuck being convicted of a crime (concealing a will) and in his being sent back to prison. Thus the novel ends where it began - with its central character jailed for a crime he says he didn't know he was committing.

Prologue

Prologue Summary

This thematically and narratively complex book tells the life story of Walter Starbuck, ex-socialist, ex-capitalist, and ex-con. Moving fluidly back and forth between past and present, incident and insight, irony and irony, the novel explores themes relating to the tension between capitalism and communism, layers of meaning inherent in layers of identity, and the interconnectedness of all things.

In the first few lines of the prologue, the author comments that "Kilgore Trout is back again" and explains why (see "Quotes," p. ix). In the next few lines , the author comments that he received a letter from a fan of his books that contained a line that summarized "the single idea that lies at the core of [his] life's work so far." That idea is "Love may fail, but courtesy will prevail." The author then comments that had he received that letter several years before, he wouldn't have had to write several books, including the current one.

The author then comments on the origins of a character in that book, Kenneth Whistler, whom he says is based on a memorable labor unionist, Powers Hapgood, with whom he (the author) once had lunch. He describes Hapgood as a colorful, talkative figure who told several stories about himself and his crusades for the disadvantaged. Among them are his protests in support of Sacco and Vanzetti, a pair of working men wrongly executed for murder. He explains his habitual defense of such people/cases by referring to "The Sermon on the Mount" (see "Objects/Places - The Sermon on the Mount").

The final part of the prologue is taken up with a lengthy, detailed, before-during-and-after description of the Cuyahoga Massacre, a confrontation between striking factory workers, strict-minded bosses and foolish citizen soldiers that resulted in several deaths. He writes that the massacre is a "legend" in the mind of this novel's central character, Walter Starbuck, who as a boy became a protégé of Alexander Hamilton McCone, the sensitive son of one of the factory bosses. He adds that that the reason Walter agreed to take on this role was that McCone had offered to send him to Harvard where he (McCone) had gone — and where Hapgood had also gone.

Prologue Analysis

The very first lines of the prologue are thickly layered with both mystery and meaning - and, as such, foreshadow the rest of the book, which is equally rich in thematic and narrative texture. "Kilgore Trout" is the pseudonym of a character in this novel (who writes fiction under this and other names) and the name of a writer-character that appears in other novels by the author of THIS novel (Kurt Vonnegut). The name is therefore an evocation of concealed identity and/or the same identity manifesting in a number of different ways and/or arenas - both ways of existence that manifest in several

characters and entities throughout the book (see "Topics of Discussion - In what ways ..."). Trout also seems to be a criminal of some kind, since "outside" in this context means outside prison walls - that is, no longer a convict. For the layer of meaning in this aspect of the reference to become clear, the end of the book must be considered. Walter Starbuck, the novel's protagonist and narrator, is at the conclusion of the novel about to go to prison - which is where he starts. This could mean that the reference to Trout here is simply a piece of foreshadowing, but ultimately all these potential meanings of the reference to Trout relate directly to the nature of the novel to follow. In other words, the reference suggests that what the reader is about to encounter is, like a pseudonym, a kind of disguise - an attempt to non-fictionalize the fictional. For further consideration of this possibility, see "Style - Point of View".

The rest of the prologue is richly textured with irony, with a skillful blend of social criticism and sentiment, and with humor. As such, it's a very effective introduction to the often sardonic point of view the writer gives his central character, and that character's story. Meanwhile, references to Sacco and Vanzetti (see "Characters"), and to The Cuyahoga Massacre (see "Themes - Capitalism vs. Socialism) all foreshadow the important roles these elements play in the narrative about to unfold.

Chapters 1, 2, 3 and 4

Chapters 1, 2, 3 and 4 Summary

Chapter 1 - Starbuck recalls how he sat in his jail cell on the day of his release (April 21st 1977, three years prior to the time in which he's apparently writing). He describes how a job in the Nixon White House led him to become peripherally involved in the Watergate Scandal, and sent to prison. He also describes his attempts to clear his mind of thoughts of his guilt-ridden past and terror-filled future.

Chapter 2 - Starbuck recalls the beginnings of his relationship with his beloved wife Ruth, whom he met at the end of World War II when he was a representative of the US Government at the Nazi War Crimes trials in Nuremberg and she was a starving refugee from a concentration camp. He writes of how her disillusionment with humanity made her resist loving him, marrying him, and having a child. ("If I had one," she says, "it would be a monster.") Starbuck comments that her prophecy came true - their son, he says, is a thoroughly unpleasant person now writing book reviews for the New York Times (which, he comments, is a RAMJAC Corporation paper).

Chapter 3 - Starbuck describes how, after their marriage, he and Ruth were transferred to another German city where they had their son (who, he writes, changed his name back to the Polish original when he was twenty one), and eventually to America, where Starbuck got his job in the Nixon White House. This leads him to recall the one occasion he actually met Nixon, who never actually spoke to him but made a joke about the amount he smoked - at one point, three cigarettes at a time.

Chapter 4 - Back in his prison cell, Starbuck is visited by Emil Larkin, a Watergate conspirator who, following his conviction and imprisonment, had converted to evangelical Christianity. He taunts Starbuck about his lack of friends and family, referring in particular to how Starbuck betrayed a man who Larkin says had been his best friend, Leland Clewes. That betrayal, Larkin suggests, took place when Starbuck testified about his communist past in front of a congressional committee, including then-congressman Richard Nixon. Starbuck describes Clewes as a former Harvard roommate who stole a girl from him, whom he didn't see for ten years, and who was destined to be a powerful political figure (perhaps even president) until Starbuck said he had one time been a communist. Clewes, Starbuck adds, was one of the first prisoners to serve their sentences in the same prison in which he ended up. "Small world," he comments.

Chapters 1, 2, 3 and 4 Analysis

There are several important elements developed in this section. The first is the novel's narrative style. Rambling but never incoherent, Starbuck's story jumps from image to feeling to idea, in an effective evocation of the wandering sensibilities of the old

(Starbuck is, as he himself eventually indicates, in his eighties). This stylistic approach can at times seem baffling and perhaps even irritating to a reader, but it also serves to draw the reader in, to make him/her wonder not only what is going to happen next, but how Starbuck is going to look at it, experience it, and comment on it. It also illustrates the novel's central thematic point about the inter-connectedness of all things - in the way Starbuck's ideas and memories flow one into the other, so (in his experience and in the perspective of the novel) do the events of a life.

The second key element developed here is the way it explores different kinds of relationships. The first, and perhaps most apparent, is that between two different people - between Starbuck and his wife (the most powerful and most deeply felt love-based relationship in Starbuck's life and therefore in the narrative), between Starbuck and his lovers, and between Starbuck and his friends. These relationships are essentially based in simple good will and respect, even when the relationship (like that between Starbuck and Clewes, or Starbuck and Mary Kathleen O'Looney) has been damaged. In this sort of relationship, the reader can see a manifestation of the comment in the Prologue about courtesy prevailing. The second type of relationship to note is the relationship Starbuck has with himself, one in which he is constantly evaluating who he is and adapting to who he's with in order to get something that he wants. He is, in short, a kind of emotional, intellectual, and spiritual chameleon, but without the basic inherent shape within which a chameleon's changes occur (see "Characters - Walter Starbuck"). The third type of relationship to consider is Starbuck's relationship with the world, a relationship related to the other two forms. His perceptions affect his behavior and superficially affect his beliefs, but on a much deeper level they leave him profoundly and deeply empty of personality, with genuine feeling surfacing only rarely, mostly associated with loss.

In terms of the novel's key themes, explorations of all four of the major ones begin here. The tension between capitalism and socialism is explored through the story of Sacco and Vanzetti, which also explores the thematically relevant relationship between fact and fiction (Sacco and Vanzetti are real-life historical figures). The ongoing portrayal of the interrelationship of all things is dramatized by the doctor who treated Ruth in Nuremberg being the first of several fellow "Harvard Men" Starbuck either encounters or refers to, and also in the reference to The RAMJAC Corporation, which seems to be everywhere in the lives of Starbuck and the other characters. The novel's focus on layers of identity shows up in Starbuck's story of his name-changed childhood and his "adoption" by Alexander Hamilton McCone.

Another important element is the events are given meaning; specifically, by the way the meaning of an event or a relationship is defined simply by the fact that Starbuck talks about it. For example, the fact that Clewes stole his girlfriend seems, when described at this point, more important to Starbuck than the girl's identity, which he withholds here but later reveals that it was Sarah Wyatt, whom he later says was one of the (only) four women he ever loved. It could be argued that withholding the name is simply a story telling technique, a creation of suspense. However, in a narrative such as this, where everyone and everything in the story seems inter-connected and where interconnection is in fact one of its key themes, the omission of Sarah's name here must be seen as

deliberate for reasons other than mere suspense building. It tells the reader a great deal about who Starbuck is: again, that he considers the meaning of events more important than the events themselves. This technique is employed throughout the novel.

There is a significant piece of foreshadowing in this section. The references to Starbuck's no longer smoking and to his three-cigarettes-at-one-time both foreshadow the appearance, in the final pages of the narrative, of his son, a heavy smoker taking on three cancer sticks at one time. As Starbuck himself might say "small world".

Finally, for a brief explanation of the Watergate Scandal, see "Objects/Places - Watergate".

Chapters 5, 6, 7 and 8

Chapters 5, 6, 7 and 8 Summary

Chapter 5 - Back in his cell, Starbuck is greeted by his friend the guard, Clive Carter, who speaks encouragingly to him as they walk across the open prison yard to where Starbuck is to be picked up by a bus. As they cross, they encounter di Sanza, who speaks admiringly of America and its free enterprise system. Carter speaks admiringly of di Sanza's capacity to make and save and believe in money, reminding Starbuck that he (Starbuck) once had a million dollars himself. This leads Starbuck to recall how he got that money - it was hidden in his basement at the White House by Watergate conspirators, where it was found and used as evidence in his trial. Starbuck also encounters Fender, convicted of treason during World War II and imprisoned for life. Starbuck tells how Fender, writing under one of his pseudonyms (including Kilgore Trout), included some of his (Starbuck's) experiences in prison in a short story that the RAMJAC-owned Playboy Magazine has just published. In the story, the citizens of the planet Vicuna have the ability to leave their bodies and take over the bodies of another, so the souls of Vicuna leave their dying world and journey through the universe in search of new homes. One soul arrives on Earth, where he considers entering the body of a man in Finletter Prison.

Chapter 6 - Fender's short story continues, and contains a description of a man clearly based on Starbuck. Meanwhile, the sudden excitement caused by the apparent arrival of an important prisoner leaves Starbuck alone in Fender's room, where he takes the next step of his new life (see "Quotes," p. 65). When Starbuck looks at himself in the mirror, he sees a man who "looked unhappy - on his way to a relative's funeral, perhaps ... he may have found his clothes in a rich man's ash can." The chapter concludes with his ironic one word comment - "peace."

Chapter 7 - Starbuck, waiting outside the prison for the bus to take him away, reflects on the little money he has in his pocket and how it means that he's about to rejoin the free enterprise system. This leads him to recall the last time he was in a similar position - after being let go from his White House job following the Leland Clewes affair, and after learning that his apparent disloyalty to his "friend" Clewes made him untrustworthy.

Chapter 8 - As Starbuck continues to wait, a limousine pulls up. The chauffeur (wearing a uniform with the RAMJAC Corporation logo) lets out the expected famous prisoner. As the prisoner goes inside with his lawyers, Starbuck strikes up a conversation with the chauffeur, whose name turns out to be Cleveland Lawes (a twisting variation, Starbuck notes, on the name Leland Clewes). They discuss whether Lawes has ever met the eccentrically reclusive Mrs. Jack Graham Jr., the owner of the RAMJAC Corporation (he hasn't), or the more outgoing Mr. Arpad Leen, the chairman of the RAMJAC Board (he has). The lawyers return, and soon the limousine and its passengers are off to Atlanta, where Starbuck is dropped off at the Airport. As he's waiting for his flight, he encounters a Frenchman, angry that Starbuck doesn't know what the red ribbon on his lapel means

- he (the Frenchman) reveals that it's the symbol of the French Legion of Honor, and takes it from Starbuck's suit (which he bought second hand with the ribbon attached). Finally, Starbuck gets on a plane, travels to New York, and makes his way to where he's reserved a room - "the once fashionable Hotel Arapahoe."

Chapters 5, 6, 7 and 8 Analysis

In these two chapters, the narrative takes what seems to be a pair of lengthy, apparently irrelevant diversions. The first of these is Fender's story about the planet Vicuna, which upon deeper consideration can be seen as a metaphoric exploration of Starbuck's identity - throughout the novel he absorbs different personalities and/or ways of thinking/believing in much the same way as the man in the story absorbs the personality of the alien from Vicuna. The second diversion is Starbuck's lengthy narrative of how Fender came to be convicted of treason, a tale of mistaken identity that clearly develops a facet of the novel's thematic exploration of just that subject (mistaken identity). Meanwhile, the narrative continues to develop its other key themes. Its focus on the tension between capitalism and socialism manifests in the story/appearance of di Sanza, while the reference to the RAMJAC Corporation is another reference to the book's thematic focus on the interconnectedness of all things - specifically, the pervasive, weed-like growth of capitalism.

In structural terms, these chapters mark the novel's transition into what might be described as part two - Starbuck's movement into a new phase of his life as dramatized by his physical movement away from prison. This sense of transition, both narrative and personal, is heightened by encounters with strangers: the conversation with Cleveland Lawes, for example, in which Starbuck makes a new friend as he's beginning his new life. Another example is the encounter with the Frenchman, which isn't so much about the beginning of something new as it is about the removal of something old - or perhaps more tellingly the removal of something Starbuck saw as just an ornament but which carried with it a much deeper meaning. This seems to be a fair description of his dalliance with socialism, a way of life/thinking that Starbuck wore as an ornament to his core (mostly non-existent) personality, a decoration to make himself look more attractive to Ruth, to Mary Kathleen, and to himself. On a more technical level, the appearance of the ribbon here foreshadows its appearance in Chapter 10, where it again serves as a symbol of deeper meaning to life in the presence of superficiality. Another layer of symbolic meaning can be found in the reference to the suit possibly coming from "a rich man's trash can" - Starbuck's life as a youth, and by extension as both an adult and an elderly man, was taken from the trash can of a life lived by the traumatized shell of Alexander Hamilton McCone.

The most important element of this section is the introduction of a new character - Mrs. Jack Graham, the reclusive and eccentric owner of the RAMJAC Corporation. The two are so closely tied in the minds of the characters of the novel that they seem to share the same identity - Mrs. Graham IS RAMJAC, and vice versa. However, here the novel's thematic emphasis on alternative identities (see "Themes") comes into play. Mrs. Graham may appear to "be" RAMJAC, but she is in fact (at least in her mind and heart)

the corporation's exact opposite - the actively, happily, purely socialist Mary Kathleen O'Looney.

For consideration of the use of the word "peace" here and at other (frequent) points in the narrative, see "Style - Language and Meaning." Also, for consideration of possible metaphoric meanings of "vicuna," see "Objects/Places."

Chapters 9 and 10

Chapters 9 and 10 Summary

Chapter 9 - The reference to the Arapahoe Hotel at the end of the previous chapter leads Starbuck to recall the last time he stayed there - in 1931, on the instructions of Alexander McCone, who had told him specifically how to live and behave when he arrived in New York. This recollection leads to recollections of Sarah Wyatt, one of the four women Starbuck says he ever loved (see Chapter 1) and who had loved him back, agreed to marry him, and eventually jilted him. In narration, Starbuck recounts that Sarah's family made clocks that, in order that the time could be read in the dark, were painted with radioactive radium, which poisoned the women who did the painting. At the end of the chapter, he adds, "the daughter of one of those unfortunate women would become one of the four women I have ever loved ... Mary Kathleen O'Looney..."

Chapter 10 - After a brief recollection of three of the women he had loved (Mary Kathleen, Sarah and Ruth- the fourth being his enigmatic mother), Starbuck's narration returns to the events of the dinner with Sarah. He describes their arrival at the Arapahoe, where the maitre de has, on his lapel, a little red ribbon - the ribbon of the Legion of Honor. As they look at the high priced menu, Starbuck accidentally (and lavishly) over-tips a tableside musician. Sarah assumes he's showing off, becomes furious, and insists that they leave. Starbuck is so humiliated that he cries all the way back to her apartment, explaining that everything he did that night was either a lie or an accident. This honesty, he writes in narration, led them to a good friendship that continued for years, and eventually into their membership in the Communist Party. He then writes that he decided to stay at the Arapahoe upon his release from prison for the irony of it, and when he arrives, is told by the desk clerk (Israel Edel, who Starbuck says now works for RAMJAC), that the once high class dining room has since become a cinema showing explicit gay pornography.

Chapters 9 and 10 Analysis

The first element to note about this section is the way it develops the theme relating to alternative identities. Specific manifestations of this include the way Starbuck tries to live up to the identity forced upon him by Alexander Hamilton McCone, and the way that false identity eventually trips him up, forcing him to reveal who he truly is. The second element to note here is also thematically related - the way in which Sarah is portrayed to be connected, albeit somewhat indirectly, to Mary Kathleen (in terms of the work that Mary Kathleen's mother did and also Sarah and Mary Kathleen's shared socialism). This is a manifestation of the novel's thematic exploration of interconnectedness.

An important question to consider at this point is how much of the emotion Starbuck exhibits in the car an actual representation of who he is. In other words, is he upset because he's been living a false life, or is he upset because he's been CAUGHT living a

false life? Is he truly a socialist at heart, or does he in fact HAVE no heart, as Mary Kathleen suggests, with apparent pinpoint perception, at the end of both her life and the novel (Chapter 23)? Does he adopt socialism because that's how he feels driven to live, or because he wants to stay with Sarah, who is a true socialist? A key to the answer might be found in the previously quoted comment from the prologue - "Love may fail, but courtesy will prevail." Love fails for Starbuck with both Sarah and Mary Kathleen. Does this in turn suggest that Starbuck chooses socialism, and remains a socialist for as long as he does, out of courtesy?

Chapters 11, 12, 13 and 14

Chapters 11, 12, 13 and 14 Summary

Chapter 11 - At the beginning of this brief chapter, Starbuck unpacks his things in his room at the Arapahoe and wonders what the next day will bring. He discovers that the bottom drawer of the dresser is filled with clarinet parts, which he later deduces were stolen and which, by rights (and as an ex con), he should have reported to the police. Instead, he goes to sleep, and dreams a humiliating dream in which he's smoking again.

Chapter 12 - Starbuck rises early, still on his time schedule from prison. He wanders through the deserted streets of New York City, where he buys a New York Times and reads a book review by his estranged son. He then goes into a diner, in spite of a sudden slash of fear that everyone will know his disreputable past and is happily relieved to be treated with the same unconditional affection as everyone else. One of those who treat him well is the owner, Frank Ubriaco, whom Starbuck says now works for RAMJAC. Later, Starbuck walks through the city, looking for a familiar face, and is shocked to find one - Leland Clewes, now apparently a down on his luck salesman who eventually, Starbuck writes, became a vice president for RAMJAC. It takes a while for Clewes to recognize him, and they're both distracted from their reunion by a persistent bag woman.

Chapter 13 - As Starbuck struggles to have a civilized conversation with Clewes, the bag woman claims that she knows him (Starbuck). Starbuck manages to apologize to Clewes for what happened in the past, but Clewes tells him that being sent to prison (by what Starbuck said) was the best thing that could have happened to him, to Sarah and their marriage. As Clewes is inviting Starbuck to dinner, Starbuck suddenly realizes who the bag woman is. "... the remains of Mary Kathleen O'Looney!"

Chapter 14 - As Mary Kathleen's loud claims of affection for Starbuck draw a crowd, Clewes becomes embarrassed and leaves, assuring Starbuck he'll be in touch. Meanwhile, Starbuck is urged by the well-meaning crowd to embrace Mary Kathleen ... and he does. She cries, and he starts to cry, "for the first time since I had found my wife dead in bed one morning, in my little brick bungalow in Chevy Chase, Maryland."

Chapters 11, 12, 13 and 14 Analysis

There are several important elements to note about this section. First and foremost, it marks the high point of the action so far, in that Starbuck reaches his point of deepest emotion, certainly in the narrative and quite possibly in his life. He also comes to grips with his past; or perhaps, to be more accurate, his past (in the form of Mary Kathleen's determined hug) comes to grips with him. To look at it another way, Starbuck is reunited with two of the people (Clewes and Mary Kathleen) who, at one point or another and in

various ways, have defined his identity. Later in the book (Chapter 20), he's reunited with a third - Sarah, for whom he became a socialist.

The second important element is the amount of foreshadowing used. While unpacking, Starbuck makes, in narration, a portentous reference to Leland Clewes, who soon enters the narrative as a real person (as opposed to a memory-defined embodiment of a guilt trip). In the same breath, there is also foreshadowing (albeit less heavy handed), in the reference to the clarinet parts, which play a key role in narrative developments in later chapters. Foreshadowing also appears, even more subtly, in the passing reference to the kindness of Frank Ubriaco in the diner. This foreshadows events later in the novel that dramatize the complex relationship between capitalism and socialism - specifically, when Mary Kathleen (in her persona as Mrs. Jack Graham) collects everyone (including Ubriaco) whom she thinks has done a kindness (read: a socialist act of community) to Starbuck with a RAMJAC vice-presidency (read: an act of consuming, integrity sucking capitalism).

The third important element here can be found in the final lines of Chapter 14 - specifically, in Starbuck's sudden, delicately poignant description of how he found Ruth's body. Suddenly it becomes clear that on some level, Starbuck considered his life with Ruth to be the embodiment of everything he ever dreamed of, of everything every American ever dreamed of ... and he lost it. In other words, he embraced the so-called American dream, as embodied by his wife, and wept when he lost it. By contrast, here he embraces what was once a dream of socialism, and weeps not because he lost it but because the dream has been wrecked. Does all this suggest that Starbuck, for all his irony and apparent lost-ness, is in fact a wounded idealist - or rather, an idealist without a specific ideal, just the sense that he wants to believe fully purely in something?

Chapters 15, 16, 17 18 and 19

Chapters 15, 16, 17 18 and 19 Summary

Chapter 15 - As they continue to embrace, Mary Kathleen and Starbuck murmur comfortingly to each other, with Mary Kathleen insisting she's still working towards the Communist revolution. Soon she recovers herself, grabs her shopping bags (which contain all her worldly possessions), and then takes Starbuck to her secret places. The first is a dark, oppressive cavern below Grand Central station where she sleeps, while the second is a bright open space at the top of the Chrysler Building where the American Harp Company (which Starbuck says had recently become a RAMJAC subsidiary) has a showroom. There Mary Kathleen and Starbuck encounter Delmar Peale, an ancient harp salesman, who is, it turns out, unhappy that Mary Kathleen has brought a stranger into the showroom. He lets her stay there, but doesn't want her to bring anyone else. In an attempt to defuse the situation, Starbuck says he's there to do business - specifically, to find a market for clarinet parts (thinking of the parts in the dresser drawer in his hotel room). He writes that at that moment, Peale knew that a large number of clarinet parts had been stolen, and was calculating a way to call the police.

Chapter 16 - This chapter begins with the revelation that Mary Kathleen was, in fact, "the legendary Mrs. Jack Graham, the majority stockholder in The RAMJAC Corporation" (see "Quotes," p. 153). Starbuck says he didn't find that out until much later, and that that as they sat and talked, he still thought she was just Mary Kathleen, gone a bit mad. He interjects a comment about the finite life of harps - "the tensions in a harp," he writes, "are so tremendous and unrelenting that it becomes unplayable after fifty years and belongs in a dump or a museum." (See "Topics of Discussion - Consider the image ...") Mary Kathleen talks about how lost her life has been since the death of her husband Jack (the founder of RAMJAC), how she coped with her loss with alcohol, how she became such a drunk that she was given shock treatments, and how those treatments destroyed much of her memory. Hence, Starbuck writes, she has no knowledge or memory of his involvement in Watergate - all she remembers is that they were once communist idealists together. She also talks about how worried she is that there is no kindness anywhere, but is reassured when Starbuck tells her about all the people who've helped him (Carter the prison guard, Fender the prison tailor, Lawes the chauffeur, Edel the hotel clerk, Ubriaco the chef, even Leland Clewes) and she describes them as saints. She then shows Starbuck a picture of him she's carried with her ever since they parted, taken when they were both very young. A moment later, the police arrive to take Starbuck away.

Chapter 17 - Starbuck launches into a complex reminisce of how, decades before, he and Mary Kathleen first made love on the afternoon before a presentation by Kenneth Whistler - an afternoon interrupted by the unexpected arrival of Alexander Hamilton McCone, who had come to see how the young Starbuck was doing at Harvard.

Throughout these interrupted memories, he repeatedly and musingly inserts the comment that it's a "small world."

Chapter 18 - Starbuck describes how he went with Mary Kathleen to Whistler's pro-Communism presentation, where she (he writes with some shame), was much more inspired than he was (see "Quotes," p. 171). He comments that several people at the presentation clamored to hear about Whistler's experience protesting the treatment of Sacco and Vanzetti, and then offers a detailed narrative of their histories and their executions.

Chapter 19 - This chapter describes how Kenneth Whistler appointed himself the leader of the protest against the treatment received by Sacco and Vanzetti, and how after their executions he posted a banner in the funeral parlor where their bodies lay. On the banner, Starbuck writes, "were painted the words that the man who had sentenced [them] to death had spoken to a friend after he had passed the sentence: DID YOU SEE WHAT I DID TO THOSE ANARCHIST BASTARDS THE OTHER DAY?"

Chapters 15, 16, 17 18 and 19 Analysis

This section is notable for several reasons, the most important being the revelation of Mary Kathleen's identity. She is, in many ways, a personification of the tension that serves as the narrative's thematic and narrative core - between capitalism (which, as Mrs. Graham/the head of RAMJAC, she embodies) and socialism (which, as Mary Kathleen, she clings to). It might not be going too far to suggest that her apparent madness can be seen as representing the madness of a society living with/in the same tension, a society in which individuals struggle for value and identity and recognition in the face of enforced (and for the top drawer capitalists, necessary) anonymity.

Another, not unrelated, element worthy of note is the visual and atmospheric contrast between the open airiness atop the Chrysler Building and the enclosed dankness of the Grand Central cavern. There are several metaphoric values to explore here, many of which are relevant to the novel's themes and characterizations - freedom/imprisonment, danger/safety, lies/honesty ... and, of course, capitalism/socialism. For further consideration of these parallels see "Objects/Places" and "Topics for Discussion - Discuss the ways ..."

Another important element here is the thematically significant way in which it blends fact (the stories of Sacco, Vanzetti and the vindictive judge) and fiction (the narrative of Starbuck's life). The execution narratives and the outrageous comments of the trial judges are all matters of historical record - they actually happened. As previously discussed, the author uses these incidents as a springboard for an artistically shaped, thematically intense discussion of the relationship between "noble, victimized" communism and "evil, exploitive, narrow minded" capitalism.

Still another noteworthy element is the way the rambling narrative flows back and forth between different layers of memory. On a stylistic level, it again invokes a necessary

and valuable sense of age and of wandering attention in the life and mind of the central character. On a thematic level, it again explores the interconnections between experiences, individuals, and feelings.

Finally, it's interesting to note a parallel here between Mary Kathleen who, it seems, has forgotten all about the bad things Starbuck has done, and Leland Clewes who, as is revealed in Chapter 20, seems to have forgiven Starbuck for all the bad things he (Starbuck) has done to him. In short, they have moved on (albeit in very different ways) from their troubled past, while Starbuck seems on some level to remain stuck in his.

Chapters 20, 21, 22 and 23

Chapters 20, 21, 22 and 23 Summary

Chapter 20 - Starbuck describes how, after his arrest, he was taken to an overcrowded police precinct, where he was put in a padded room in the basement (similar, he points out, to the subterranean cell in which he worked while in the Nixon White House) and forgotten for eight hours. There, Starbuck recalls (among other things) how Mary Kathleen found her husband. After being rejected by a drunken and violent Kenneth Whistler, she ran out into the mining down where he was protesting and into the arms of a young miner - Jack Graham. In narration, Starbuck comments that while he was in his cell, Mary Kathleen was arranging for the people Starbuck had told her about that she had called saints (see Chapter 16) to be made vice presidents in RAMJAC.

Eventually, Starbuck is released and bundled into a limo, where he joins the other "saints" - Clewes, Edel (the clerk at the Arapahoe) and Ubriaco (the chef at the diner). All of them are taken to the luxurious apartment of Arpad Leen (Mrs. Graham's assistant), who explains that he's been ordered by Mrs. Graham to make them all vice presidents in RAMJAC, and that he has to speak with them individually to find out what they should be vice president OF. Ubriaco goes first, and as they're waiting their turn, the others speculate about what they did to get Mrs. Graham to notice them. (It must be remembered that at this point Starbuck doesn't know Mrs. Graham and Mary Kathleen are the same person - this is why he doesn't make the connection between having told her about them and why they're there). As their conversation continues, a phone call comes from Clewes' wife - Sarah Wyatt, Starbuck's ex lover/fiancé. When she learns he's there, she immediately asks to speak with him and the two of them slip into the same joking intimacy that characterized their relationship years before (see "Quotes," p. 202).

Chapter 21 - As their conversation concludes, Sarah asks Starbuck to do something else he used to do - imitate his mother's laugh. Starbuck explains that his mother (the Polish immigrant servant) had been trained to never laugh out loud - the people she was working for might think she was laughing at them. So, he writes, "she made tiny pure sounds like a music box ... it was accidental that they were so beautiful." As he's making the noise, Leen comes back in, and Starbuck comments that he found out later that that was the moment Leen started to believe that he (Starbuck) was Mrs. Graham in disguise, checking up on him.

Chapter 22 - Starbuck comments that for the rest of the evening, Leen seemed desperate for his approval but that he (Starbuck) couldn't figure out why. He says it only became clear during Leen's conversation with him, a comically written narrative of confusion and misunderstanding during which Leen kisses Starbuck's hand, believing that Starbuck is his adored Mrs. Graham. Starbuck reacts with disgusted anger, to which Leen reacts with shame, to which Starbuck reacts with bullying. As a humiliated

Leen bids him good night, Starbuck realizes he knows where he can find Mary Kathleen, and prepares to go looking for her.

Chapter 23 - When Starbuck goes down into the cavern underneath Grand Central Station (see Chapter 15), he sees the contents of one of Mary Kathleen overstuffed shopping bags spilled onto the ground. He follows a trail of blood spots to an unused washroom, now inhabited by the dying Mary Kathleen - she was, she says, hit by a taxi (which Starbuck thinks, with ironic awareness, may have been one of the taxis owned by RAMJAC). She tells him she doesn't want to be taken care of and in fact doesn't want to live any more (see "Quotes," p. 217), adding that she's tired of being unable to trust anyone. She also tells him that her will is hidden in her left shoe, and that she's left The RAMJAC Corporation "to its rightful owners, the American people." As her life ebbs away and as Starbuck comforts her, she tells him "you couldn't help it that you were born without a heart. At least," she adds, "you tried to believe what the people with hearts believed - so you were a good man just the same." With that, Mary Kathleen dies.

Chapters 20, 21, 22 and 23 Analysis

The first element to note here, perhaps unnecessarily, is the obvious parallel between the madness Starbuck experiences in his jail cell and the madness caused by being ignored in his office at the White House, a parallel he himself draws in narration. Other elements are developed more subtly, but to similar effect. The first is the way the action dramatizes the conflict between capitalism and socialism. The socialist Mary Kathleen wants to do good for people who have done good, and follows through on that desire the only way she knows how - by using her capitalistically powerful status as Mrs. Jack Graham to give the good people jobs within her organization. In other words, she achieves her socialist end through capitalist means. Does this make her a socialist or a capitalist? It wouldn't be going too far to suggest that she was, in all likelihood, aware of this apparent paradox, and that her awareness (not to mention her inability to reconcile these two opposing impulses in her life) was part of what drove her mad.

The telephone conversation between Sarah and Starbuck functions on several levels. First, it's another manifestation of the novel's thematic premise that all things are connected, and yet another manifestation of the superficial, defined-by-others way Starbuck lives his life. It also, interestingly enough, serves as another example of the way the forgiving Clewes seems able to move away from the past while Starbuck seems stuck in his. (For further discussion of this point, see "Chapters 15 and 16 Analysis.")

Also in this section, the narrative tracks a multi-textured exploration of the secondary theme relating to layers of identity. This exploration begins with the telephone conversation between Starbuck and Sarah, in which they both act/react based on their past identities rather than their present ones. The exploration continues with Starbuck's imitation of his mother in which he, for a brief moment, assumes the identity of a woman who herself subsumed at least part of her identity as the result of the desires of another.

Like mother, like son. The most important manifestation of this thematic point (at least in this section) can be found in the conversation between Starbuck and Leen, with both men (in very carefully written dialogue) operating from essentially the same place - neither really knows, or can really identify, the person to whom they're talking, or why they're talking to that person at all.

The misunderstanding that arises echoes similar misunderstandings, also defined by misunderstandings about identity that have taken place throughout the novel. Here, as in those other circumstances, Starbuck finds himself taking on the persona appropriate to the needs of the occasion. Sarah didn't want him to be a capitalist, so he became a socialist. In this case he wanted to keep having sex with the socialist Mary Kathleen, so he rejected McCone's capitalism. In this moment he comes full circle - he wants power and control and status, and so assumes the mantle of the well connected, ruthless capitalist.

In terms of the death of Mary Kathleen, a key element to consider is the setting - Mary Kathleen dies in what she has, in her madness, considered the safest physical place in the city, the cavern beneath Grand Central. The safety and feeling of home the setting provides reinforces the safety and sense of belonging evident as she dies in her spiritual/intellectual home - socialism. A second key element is the irony, pointed out by Starbuck, of her possibly being killed by a RAMJAC taxi. The symbolism here is not hard to see - if she was killed by a RAMJAC car (and there's no reason to think otherwise), she was killed by not only a manifestation of capitalism, but by a manifestation of her own submission to it, and perhaps even of her subsequent guilt.

Finally, there is her comment about the relative emptiness of Starbuck's soul, a comment upon which all analysis of his character depends. He certainly has moments of indicating he MIGHT have a heart (his reference to grieving Ruth's death, his crying when he reconnects with Mary Kathleen again), but there are more references to his adopting characteristics and beliefs to suit the needs of the situation in which he found himself. In other words, it's easy (and probably accurate) to suggest that Mary Kathleen has him dead to rights. Does it necessarily follow that in trying to believe what others believed, he was a good man? On the whole, the evidence suggests not, with the most important piece of evidence (his keeping the will secret) the most telling of all.

Epilogue

Epilogue Summary

Starbuck describes how he gave Mary Kathleen's maiden name to the paramedics treating her, since announcing the death of Mrs. Jack Graham would create, in his words, "an avalanche." He goes on to say that this "was not cunning ... as some people have said. It was my natural awe of an avalanche." After Mary Kathleen's body is taken away, Starbuck returns to the Arapahoe, his pockets full of documents (including the will) taken from Mary Kathleen. He finds that Leen has left him a message offering him a job running a division of RAMJAC that now includes the New York Times (where, it must be remembered, Starbuck's son works). The next day, Starbuck arranges for Mary Kathleen's body to be buried under her original name - and reveals that he had concealed Mary Kathleen's will in a safety deposit box, was caught, and is about to go back to prison, convicted of unlawfully concealing a will.

Starbuck then briefly describes the high life he lived for two years as the result of his job with RAMJAC, and how the various business interests of the RAMJAC Corporation, are, in apparent concordance with Mrs. Graham's will, being sold off. Ultimately, he adds, they're not being sold off to "the people," which is what she (in her still-Communist frame of mind before her death) wanted. They are instead being snapped up by very wealthy business interests, interests "as indifferent to the needs of the people as, say, thunderstorms ... [they] were as unaffected by the joys and tragedies of human beings as the rain that fell on the night that ... Sacco and Vanzetti died in the electric chair."

Narration then describes a farewell party thrown for Starbuck by Leland and Sarah (nee: Wyatt) Clewes. All the people helped by the RAMJAC Corporation because of their friendly encounters with the fresh-from-prison Starbuck are there with their new wives and their successful new lives. Starbuck concludes his description of the guest list with the comment that "It was raining outside." He then describes his feelings of hopelessness in spite of the evident attempts of his friends to celebrate. "The human condition," he writes, "in an exploding universe would not have been altered one iota if, rather than live as I have, I had done nothing ..." His feeling of hopelessness increases when his friends propose toasts and make jokes (see "Quotes," p. 238).

Finally, two events draw the party and the novel to a close. First is the arrival of Starbuck's long estranged son and family, who live in the same building as the Clewes' and were invited by Sarah. Walter Starbuck Jr. turns out to be as short as his father, as fat as his mother (Ruth), and as heavy a smoker as his father once was. The second event is the playing of a recording of Starbuck's testimony before Richard Nixon's committee - that is, the testimony recorded before he named Leland Clewes a former communist. In that testimony, Nixon asks why Starbuck, "as the son of immigrants who had been treated so well by Americans ... and had been sent to Harvard by an American capitalist, [was] so ungrateful to the American economic system." Starbuck writes that the answer he gave wasn't original, in the same way as nothing in his life had been

original.He says he quoted what Kenneth Whistler had said in a similar situation - that he had done what he did because of "The Sermon on the Mount". There was, Starbuck writes, "polite applause when the people at the party realized that the phonograph record had ended." He then writes "Good-bye."

Epilogue Analysis

The first point of consideration here is Starbuck's statement that he wasn't being cunning by concealing the will. On the one hand, he might genuinely have been afraid of the storm of controversy that might erupt - but this, frankly, is likely a lie. Throughout the narrative of his life, he has displayed little sensitivity to the potential consequences of his actions. He insisted upon fathering a child with Ruth without considering her feelings, he "outed" Leland Clewes as a communist without considering what might happen, and he accepted the mysterious trunk of money from the Watergate conspirators without demur. All this suggests, however, that in making his decision to conceal the will he was (paradoxically?) aware of what would happen if he DID conceal the will; he would have a (capitalistic) job and security in his old age. In short, there is no clear answer to the question of why Starbuck does what he does - for further consideration of this issue see "Topics for Discussion - Discuss Starbuck's decision ..."

The second noteworthy element here is the reference to thunderstorms and rain, both in terms of the night of Sacco and Vanzetti's death and on the night of Starbuck's "farewell" party. There is the sense that Starbuck is drawing a somewhat incongruous parallel between his experience and those of the wrongly executed men, that somewhere inside Starbuck considers himself a martyr to capitalism in the same way as Sacco and Vanzetti were. The question of whether the parallel is valid is, of course, open for discussion.

Other important elements here include Starbuck's reference to the hopeless way in which he feels he's lived his life which, pathetic as it seems, could be seen as an accurate perception - throughout the novel (and indeed his life) he has made shallow, self-serving commitments to bits of ideals, feelings and relationships that ultimately prove transitory, and irrelevant. The one exception seems to be his commitment to Ruth, and more specifically to loving her, which seems to have lasted from the moment they met beyond her death and into the rest of his life. Indeed, there has been the sense throughout the book, a sense crystallized here, that Starbuck has been content to be involved with that which is available at the moment, and overjoyed at the occasional spasm of satisfaction (i.e., a flicker of friendship, a moment of sexual pleasure, a spasm of realized, if misplaced, idealism). Could the world have gone on without his influence? Possibly. Does that make his life irrelevant? Again, it's open for debate.

The appearance of Starbuck's son comes as both a surprise and as inevitability. The character has been discussed in such thoroughly negative terms throughout the book that the revelation he is more pathetic than monstrous is both unexpected and poignant. Meanwhile, his evident similarities in habit and temperament to his father suggest not only that his father has also been more pathetic than monstrous, but also that, at least

in the Starbuck family, life is lived in emulation of others, even if those others have been physically absent from that life for years.

Finally, the image of the recording reinforces the image of a life lived second hand - specifically, Starbuck's life as a playback of the lives/ideals/goals of others. It also reinforces the idea that Starbuck's existence is defined by his past, rather than his present or his future. Meanwhile, the concluding reference to The Sermon on the Mount functions on three levels. Because The Sermon (see "Objects/Places") was referred to in the prologue, technically and structurally it creates a sense of bookending, of cycle and/or of circle, of an ending linking to a beginning. On the level of tone, it concludes the book with a sense of irony, in that Starbuck has only BELIEVED he's been living a life of humility when in fact almost all his life he's been entirely self serving. In a related sense, on the level of theme the reference implies a life of service to the ideals of communism, when in fact in his self-serving-ness he has exhibited one of the dominant traits of capitalism - me first, me only, me fulfilled. It might not be going too far to suggest that there is the possibility of a fourth layer of meaning to the reference - perhaps now that he's been punished for what is apparently a capitalistic act (the concealment of the will), he will finally learn the true meaning of the message of The Sermon.

Jailbird

Summary

Analysis

Characters

Walter Starbuck

Starbuck is the novel's central character, and its narrator. He is a white male American, in his eighties at the time the novel takes place, born to a pair of Polish immigrants who changed their name from Stankiewicz during an early phase of their lives in America, and who worked as house servants for a reclusive industrialist, Alexander Hamilton McCone (see below). The novel narrates how Starbuck grows up as McCone's protégé, living his life as a young adult according to his (McCone's) very strict, and arbitrary, rules. He begins the process of breaking those rules when he meets and falls in love with Mary Kathleen O'Looney (see below), also the child of immigrants (hers were Irish) but who, unlike Starbuck, grew up in a household where the rights of the worker, as opposed to the control of the owner, were the highest priority. Under Mary Kathleen's influence and guidance, Starbuck becomes a Communist, but disguises his inclinations towards socialism beneath a veneer of capitalist ambition. That ambition gets him a series of government jobs, but those jobs end when Starbuck confesses to his communist history. He drifts without work, supported by his wife, until approached to take a position in the presidential administration of Republican President Richard Nixon, where he works happily (and unnoticed) in a small office in the basement of the White House. Starbuck, in spite of his menial job, is accidentally caught up in the fallout of Nixon's criminal activities and sent to prison for three years. Upon his release, he is accidentally reunited with the now reclusive Mary Kathleen O'Looney who makes Starbuck one of her vice presidents, a position he continues to hold until some time after her death, when he is again branded a criminal and put in prison.

In short, Starbuck's life (as narrated in the novel) is almost entirely reactive. He takes action, has feelings, expresses opinions and forms beliefs almost exclusively in response to what other people think of him, feel for him, or imagine he should do. In this context, it seems that Mary Kathleen's observation that he was born without a heart seems simultaneously telling, crucially important, and quite poignant. For further consideration of Starbuck's character, see "Topics for Discussion - On at least half a dozen key occasions..."

Ruth Starbuck

Ruth is described by Starbuck as one of the four women he ever loved. The other three are Mary Kathleen O'Looney and Sarah Wyatt (see below) and his mother (see above). Ruth is a survivor of a Holocaust concentration camp, discovered by Starbuck while on a diplomatic assignment in postwar Germany - because of her skill with languages, Ruth is acting as a freelance interpreter. Starbuck immediately becomes attracted to her, hires her, courts her, and eventually asks her to marry him. After having discovered firsthand (in the concentration camp) just how inhumane both the world and the people who populate it can be, Ruth considers both love and marriage essentially futile, but lets

herself be persuaded by Starbuck to let him love her, to marry and to have a child. After her marriage, Ruth takes refuge from both her painful past, her troubled present and her uncertain future in food, becoming increasingly obese. She dies two weeks before Starbuck is arrested on suspicion of participation in the Watergate Scandal (see "Objects/Places - Watergate"), leaving him numb to any feeling and therefore un-protesting when the police arrive to take him away (yet another way in which Starbuck leads a reactive life).

It's interesting to consider here, and in relation to the other women Starbuck says he's loved, what exactly love is to him. He never comes out and offers any kind of definition, or takes any real loving action towards any of the women. In fact, he speaks very little of his mother, eventually rejects Mary Kathleen (in her youth) because she's too low-class, and also rejects Sarah because she's not sexual enough. The only relatively clear expressions of love he makes come in relation to Ruth, specifically when he describes key moments in their life together. These include the planting of a fruit tree in the front yard of their small home, his weeping for the first time in his life when she dies, his huge sense of numb loss in the weeks after her death, and the frequent references to his dreams that she's still alive. In other words, it's reasonable to say that Ruth is the only woman Starbuck seems to have loved - truly, deeply, and unreservedly.

Mary Kathleen O'Looney

As mentioned above, Mary Kathleen is one of the four women Starbuck says he loved. She appears in the narrative in two incarnations. The first is as the young, fiery, idealistic communist of Starbuck's youth, where she plays a key role in shaping both his character, by introducing him to communist ideology, and his life, given that his reaction to that that ideology leads him to make some life-altering choices (ie his mentioning of Lewes to Nixon's anti-communist committee). In her second incarnation, she is much older, still fiery, still idealistic, and still communist (but now quite crazed - her last name is but one indication of her madness) bag lady of his old manhood. Here her actions do more to affect Starbuck's life than his character - confronting him on the street, arranging for him to have a job, dying in his arms. Also in this incarnation, however, Mary Kathleen provides both the reader and Starbuck with a vivid insight into his character - in her dying moments, she suggests he was born without a heart. This is, on one level, quite true - from her perspective, as well as from the reader's and Starbuck's own, he has led his life mostly in reaction to people, events and circumstances outside his own desires and beliefs. On another level, however, it must be remembered that Starbuck himself notes that when he first embraces the deranged Mary Kathleen on the street (Chapter 14), he cries for the first time since his wife died. This suggests that, on some level, he loved Mary Kathleen as much as he loved his wife - or, at the very least, he loved the IDEA of her that much.

For consideration of Mary Kathleen's second identity (the reclusive, endlessly wealthy owner of the RAMJAC Corporation), see "Topics of Discussion - Discuss the relationship ..."

Finally, a word about the metaphoric meaning of Mary Kathleen's last name - is she in fact as "looney" as her name suggests she is for believing she can still be the idealistic socialist she once was at the same time as she's living the life of a rabid capitalist?

Sarah Wyatt

Sarah is the fourth of the women Starbuck says he loved in his life, and is the least developed (as a character) of his three so-called "romantic" loves (for his mother, who is never very well developed as a character, he had a different kind of love - idealized, childlike, and remote). Like Mary Kathleen, Sarah appears in two incarnations - first, as the aristocratic, impoverished, sexually frigid but proper girl with whom Starbuck gets involved when he first arrives in New York, and then later as the hard working, compassionate, idealistic wife of Starbuck's former colleague (and former "victim"), Leland Clewes. The most noteworthy element of Sarah's character is her tendency towards keeping conversation and/or relationship on a certain superficial, jokey level. In that sense she is a vivid, defining contrast to Mary Kathleen (who lives with a certain mad intensity), to Ruth (who feels deeply but can't cope with those feelings), and to Starbuck himself (who WANTS to feel deeply and live intensely, but with rare exceptions doesn't seem to have it in him to do so). In other words, Sarah Wyatt can be seen as embodying the veneer of functionality presented by capitalism in America - that everything is just fine the way it is, and always will be.

Leland Clewes

This character might best be described as the accidental victim of Starbuck's communist idealism. He was once Starbuck's roommate, betrayed into prison by him (in an action that haunts Starbuck for the rest of his life), and eventually married to one of the women he loved (Sarah Wyatt). An interesting question to consider is whether there's a relationship between what Starbuck describes as Clewes' "theft" of Sarah and Starbuck's incriminating testimony - the narrative never explicitly asks this question, and certainly never answers it, even obliquely. Finally, when both men are coming to the end of their lives, they meet by chance on a busy New York street, where Clewes immediately indicates that he has forgiven Starbuck for what he did, a transcendent exoneration that strikes Starbuck to the bone with astonishment. Clewes therefore becomes a metaphoric / symbolic manifestation of a sort of spiritual progress that few (if any) of the other characters in the book (who are, in one way or another, stuck in and/or trapped by the past) can manage.

Alexander Hamilton McCone

This character is Starbuck's conservative, capitalist mentor. He is named after one of the founding fathers of the United States (Alexander Hamilton was a financier rather than a politician, but he nevertheless played a key role in developing and defining America's economic foundations). The prologue describes how he (McCone) was

traumatized by a violent incident involving his industrialist family and a violent, tragic, fatal labor dispute, to the point that he developed a completely debilitating stammer. He is the first of several individuals who project their ideals and beliefs onto the independence-challenged Starbuck, and becomes furious when he discovers that he (Starbuck) is rejecting those ideals. He can be seen as a symbolic representation of the entire capitalist system - wealthy, exploitive, manipulative, demanding, petulant, judgmental ... and, in his inability to speak, unable to communicate in a straightforward, fundamentally truthful manner.

Sacco and Vanzetti

These characters never actually appear in the book, but are referred to several times. They, like a number of other secondary characters, are actual historical individuals, Italian immigrant workers falsely arrested, tried, and executed for murder. They are portrayed throughout the book as icons of the wronged, idealized and victimized metaphoric examples of how the less advantaged can be destroyed by capitalism.

Richard Nixon

Richard Nixon, like Sacco and Vanzetti, is an actual historical person, a former president of the United States famous for his criminal activities (see "Objects/Places - Watergate") and his participation in the real-life communist witch hunts of the 1950s. He appears throughout the novel as a representation of humorless, devious self-interest - in other words, as an embodiment of the dangers associated with political capitalism, or with capitalist politicians.

Emil Larkin

Larkin is a fellow inmate of Starbuck's in Finletter Prison, a fellow participant in the Watergate affair. There is little evidence to suggest that Larkin is a real person (in the way that Nixon, for example, is a real person). There are indications, however, that Larkin at least is based on a real person - G. Gordon Liddy, a real-life Watergate conspirator who converted to evangelical Christianity while in prison.

Fender and di Sanza

Both these characters are fellow inmates of Finletter Prison where Starbuck is incarcerated for three years. Di Sanza was convicted of fraud, in Starbuck's mind will be convicted again, and is a vocal (and excitable) advocate for the free enterprise/capitalist system. He can be seen as representing the single minded self-righteousness and amorality of those who come to believe fully in the value of that system. Fender was sent there for committing what the government saw as treason but what he (Fender) saw as an act of abject love and devotion (for the details of Fender's story, see Chapter 6). Fender is also a writer, publishing several short stories under a number of different

pseudonyms. For further consideration of the thematic implications of this character, see "Themes - Alternative Identities."

Clive Carter, Cleveland Lawes, Israel Edel, Frank Ubriaco

These individuals each/all do a kindness of one form or another to Starbuck on his journey from prison into the outside world, actions which could be described, in their essence, as treating him like a human being. "Mrs. Jack Graham" hears what they did, she immediately rewards them with well-paying positions in the RAMJAC Corporation. The irony here is that selfless, cost-free good intentions and good actions are rewarded with money - exactly the opposite of what the once-purely communist Mary Kathleen (who is, of course, Mrs. Jack Graham) would have thought was both right and appropriate.

Arpad Leen

Leen is Mrs. Graham's right hand man, obsessively (Starbuck would say religiously) devoted to making sure her will is done. Starbuck's narration also suggests he (Leen) is romantically in love with the rarely glimpsed Mrs. Graham, a circumstance that makes the thematically relevant suggestion that capitalism (in the guise of the intensely capitalistic "Mrs. Graham") can, for some people, come dangerously close to a kind of religious faith.

Kenneth Whistler

In contrast, and perhaps even parallel, to the negative portrayals of idealistic capitalism (Nixon, Leen) is this character, an embodiment of the failure of idealistic communism - or rather, the failure of a man who preached the transcendent power of communism (for a description of Whistler's failure, see Chapter 20). The presence of Whistler, juxtaposed with that of Nixon and Leen (and the other manifestations of failed and/or corrupt capitalism), suggests the thematically relevant possibility that the novel is exploring the failings of not only capitalist idealism but communist idealism as well. In fact, it might not be going too far to suggest that the novel is, on some level, pointing out the failings of idealism in general.

Objects/Places

The Cuyahoga Massacre

The circumstances of this event (an ultimately violent confrontation between workers, bosses and law enforcement agencies) are described in detail in the prologue. Its inclusion in the narrative serves two purposes. The first is to define the character of the individual (Alexander Hamilton McCone) who is one of the prime formative influences on the main character (Walter Starbuck) and who in turn defines him. The second, and more important, is to foreshadow the ongoing tension between labor and management (and by extension between socialism/communism and capitalism) that underpins the book's central theme and much of its plot.

Harvard University

This is one of the most prestigious universities in the United States. Graduating from Harvard, in the book as in life, is generally held to be a symbol of achievement, status, and integrity. The book's central character is a graduate of Harvard, and throughout the book, he encounters a number of other graduates, an almost comically high number - many of whom have status but lose that status (not to mention their integrity) as the result of negative, often criminal, achievement. The central character is one of them. In other words, being "a Harvard man" is, in most cases in Jailbird, an ironic commentary on how integrity and status are in fact superficial to the point of being meaningless.

The Sermon on the Mount

The Sermon on the Mount is a story from the New Testament of the Bible. Jesus Christ speaks to his disciples of what have come to be known as Christian values - humility, poverty, forbearance, etc. His lesson is that those who live humbly, godly lives will enter what he calls "the kingdom of heaven." The origins of the phrase "the meek shall inherit the earth" can be found in The Sermon, which in Jailbird appears on more than one occasion as a source of inspiration for those who fight, legally or otherwise, for the rights of the "downtrodden" worker.

The RAMJAC Corporation

On numerous occasions throughout the novel, The RAMJAC Corporation appears as the controlling entity behind a wide variety of businesses - magazines (some of which, such as Time, exist in reality as well as in the novel), restaurants (again some of which, such as McDonald's, exist in both arenas), manufacturing, etc. Almost every business interest referred to in the novel has ties of some sort to RAMJAC. It is omnipresent and acquisitive, almost as though it has a life of its own. It represents the ruthlessness, the inescapability and controlling nature of capitalist philosophy, attitude and behavior, all

things which socialism in general and socialist idealists like Mary Kathleen O'Looney strive against. One of the book's chief ironies is that Mary Kathleen marries the man who eventually founds RAMJAC, and upon his death inherits the power and the money associated with it.

Nuremberg

A city in Germany, where Nazi leaders were placed on trial for war crimes following the end of World War II. The novel's protagonist, Walter Starbuck, works in Germany during the trial, and it's there he meets the love of his life, Ruth. There is irony here, in that love blooms in a city where death and slaughter are the prime preoccupations.

Finletter Prison

This is the prison, located near a noisy air force base, where Starbuck is imprisoned at the beginning of the narrative.

The Planet Vicuna

This fictional planet in another galaxy is the setting for a short story, written by an inmate in Finletter Prison. The inhabitants of Vicuna have the ability to project their souls from their bodies into the body of another, whose being is ultimately taken over. This can be seen as a metaphoric parallel to the way Starbuck lives his life - in many ways and under many circumstances, his will and being are taken over by others (Alexander Hamilton McCone, Mary Kathleen O'Looney, the RAMJAC Corporation).

Also, "vicuna" is the name of a South American pack animal whose coat is shorn and used to make clothes for humans. Is it too far a stretch to see this as one aspect of the vicuna's identity being taken over by another in the same way as the aliens take over the identities of human beings - and, by extension, in the same way as various belief systems take over Starbuck's identity?

The Legion of Honor Ribbon

This medallion-like ribbon is worn by members of the French Legion of Honor, an organization found on the principles of, and renowned for, courage and integrity. Starbuck's suit, purchased second hand, has a Legion of Honor Ribbon on it, but he never learns what it stands for, until it's removed from his jacket by an indignant Frenchman. This situation can be seen as a metaphor for Starbuck's general lack of courage and integrity - not to mention his lack of curiosity.

The Arapahoe Hotel

This is where Starbuck stays following his release from prison. It's also where, on the instructions of Alexander Hamilton McCone, he takes Sarah Wyatt on an important date when they first got together. At that point, the once opulent hotel has gone to seed, but still plays host to a very high end dining room. When Starbuck goes there following his release from prison, the dining room has evolved into a porn theater. The deterioration of both the dining room and the hotel, once high class but now seedy, represents the eventual and inevitable social and spiritual decay that results as capitalism runs its course.

New York City

The epicenter of capitalism in America, and some might argue the world. The so-called "City That Never Sleeps" is where Starbuck ends up following his release from prison, where he (arguably) gives in to his capitalist dark side (as it were), and ends up in prison. For further consideration of Starbuck's actions, see "Topics of Discussion - Discuss Starbuck's Decision."

The Top of the Chrysler Building and the Cavern under Grand

The Chrysler Building is one of the most famous structures in New York City - tall, metallically gleaming, beautiful architecture. Atop the building (in the novel at least) is a bright, airy refuge for both singing birds and the demented Mary Kathleen O'Looney. The freedom and brightness there is contrasted vividly with the dark, catacomb-like atmosphere of the secret cavern under Grand Central Station (New York's famous hub of rail transportation) where Mary Kathleen takes refuge from the world and its troubles.

Harps

The open space atop the Chrysler Building is (again at least in the novel) the site of a small old store selling harps. For consideration of the symbolic value of harps, as defined in the novel, see both Chapter 16 and "Topics for Discussion - Consider the Image/Description ..."

Themes

Capitalism vs. Socialism

The core theme of this thematically complex novel is its exploration of the essential tension between the capitalist and socialist economic systems. The former is based, at least in part, on the premise that every individual has the right to profit financially from business, to keep that profit, and to accumulate it. The novel seems to take the position that this system is inherently flawed to the point of being corrupt and soulless, illustrating again and again how those driven to keep and accumulate profit, and its associated power and status, exploit those who actually do the work so the company can make profit. For its part, socialism is based on the premise that whatever is earned by any individual in any business should ultimately be shared, so that every individual receives the same level of income, sustenance, status, etc. The novel takes the position that socialism is an ideal, if not THE ideal, economic system, but points out that it's almost impossible to maintain and/or live by those ideals when faced with the shiny, prosperous appeal of capitalism. This theme is explored in two ways. First, most of the novel's incidents/confrontations are motivated, to greater and/or lesser degrees, by tension between capitalists and socialists. Second, and most importantly, this tension is at the core of the central conflict within the novel's protagonist, Walter Starbuck. Over the course of his life (and therefore of the narrative) he moves (and is moved by others) back and forth between living socialist and capitalist lives, with capitalism ultimately winning out (when he chooses to suppress Mary Kathleen's socialist will in favor of maintaining his newly found capitalist status). This suggests the thematic perspective that capitalism's power is both corruptive and irresistible.

The Interconnectedness of All Things

Jailbird has several secondary themes that play out at the same time as the principal theme the tension between capitalism and socialism, many of which can also be seen as sub-themes of the principal. One such secondary theme relates to the interconnectedness of all things, dramatized in two key ways. The first is how Starbuck repeatedly encounters so-called "Harvard Men" seemingly everywhere, and encounters manifestations of the omnipresent RAMJAC Corporation in the same way - all these encounters seem surprising and at times both unlikely and coincidental, almost to the point of becoming comic. Here, however, can be seen this sub-theme's relationship to the principal theme - both Harvard men (in the book) and the RAMJAC Corporation are in fact manifestations of the pervasiveness of capitalism. The novel therefore seems to be making the somewhat disturbing point that all things are connected through capitalism, whether the people living it like it or not. The second way the theme of interconnectedness manifests relates to the way in which the story is told - or more specifically, the way the story's narrator (Starbuck) puts the pieces of that story together. Memory leads to insight leads to feeling leads to incident leads to memory in a loosely woven tapestry in which everything he thinks/speaks of relates to something else,

sometimes in very unexpected ways. This manifestation of this particular secondary theme functions, on some level, as an affirmation of a more positive value than the manifestation relating to capitalism - very often what Starbuck thinks, feels and remembers reminds him of the importance/value of being a caring, sensitive, feeling human being, as opposed to just being someone out to consume profit. The irony, of course, is that he doesn't always live according to what he remembers/feels.

Alternative Identities

There are several situations throughout the novel where the reality of who a person is revealed to be is at odds with the image they project. A prime example is the way Starbuck comments on the way society views so-called "Harvard Men" as upright and successful, when in fact almost every Harvard man who appears in the novel (Starbuck included) turns out to be corrupt in some way. Other examples include the way Starbuck doesn't realize Mary Kathleen is in fact Mrs. Jack Graham and the way Arpad Leen (Mrs. Graham's devoted assistant) thinks Starbuck is in fact Mrs. Graham. Fender (in the prison) manifests this theme in two ways - first, in the way he unwittingly commits treason as the result of both he and the woman he was involved with each believing in the false identity of the other, and second in the way he publishes novels and short stories under a pseudonym. The most important manifestation of this theme is the way Starbuck himself, at almost every stage of his life, strives to convince both himself and the people around him that he's something he's not. He tries to convince McCone (and Sarah Wyatt) he's a capitalist, later tries to convince Mary Kathleen that he's a socialist, and tries to convince himself that he's a decent, worthwhile human being when in fact, as Mary Kathleen points out as she lies dying, he doesn't really have a soul of his own. In short, the ultimate identities of most of the characters in this novel are layered beneath densities of masks, with the result that practically no one can be perceived as having true integrity - which, the novel seems to argue, is one result of living in a capitalistic society.

The Relationship between Reality and Fiction

Related to the novel's above-discussed exploration of masks and layered identity is a parallel exploration of the relationship between reality and fiction. Lines between the two are occasionally blurred, particularly in the prologue which presents itself (or which is presented by the author) as being mostly factual in content, when in fact it's largely fictitious. That blurriness continues in the actual body of the narrative, which contains clear, specific, and apparently appropriate references to historical individuals. Former US President Richard Nixon is perhaps the most notable of these, but there are also the frequent (and thematically essential) references to Sacco and Vanzetti (see "Characters") to consider, as well as the brief but vividly telling appearance of Roy Cohn. It may very well be that these cameo appearances of reality are a specific application of a generally used artist's technique of using life as a basis for art. In other words, life is mined for incidents, characters, relationships and ideas that can be refined and/or distilled into a work of art that strives to make, on some level of its purpose,

some kind of sense out of life. It could be argued, therefore, that appearances like these in art of real people like these both exploit the art/life relationship to its fullest, but also remind the reader that there is, or at least can be, a very real connection between that which is created in art, and that which is lived in life.

Style

Point of View

The novel is narrated from the first person subjective point of view, that of its central character, Walter Starbuck. Starbuck is in his eighties, an aspect of his character and identity (i.e., his point of view) that can be seen as manifesting in the book's sometimes rambling, often stream of consciousness, frequently contemplative narrative style. It's the point of view of a man who seems to be resigned to both what his life has been and what it's about to become, a point of view somehow both wise and bewildered, heavily ironic and disarmingly frank, self-aware and quaintly naïve - or perhaps naively quaint. Another important aspect of Starbuck's character that defines point of view is his relative lack of an individualized personality. As previously discussed, he lives most of his life in reaction to what other people see of him, think of him, expect of him, or believe of him. In other words, his is the point of view of a person to whom life happens, as opposed to a person who happens to life or shapes life to his/her own ends. For the most part he is a reactive protagonist, as opposed to an active one - he is outside of events, outside of his own life, dipping into the well of feeling and experience only occasionally, but with, in narrative terms, invariably powerful effect.

At this point, it's important to consider the point of view of the prologue, ostensibly written by the author from the point of view of introducing the factual background of his work of fiction. The prologue does contain references to actual people (Sacco and Vanzetti, Roy Cohn), but juxtaposes them with what the novel later reveals to be fictional creations (the RAMJAC Corporation). This calls into question the apparently "real" events (the Cuyahoga Massacre) and real people (Powers Hapgood) the author says inspired his work. In other words, the prologue seems to be written from the thematically relevant point of view that the lines of distinction between reality and fiction are thin, blurry, and ultimately not relevant to the definitions of meaning presented by the book.

Setting

The most important element to note about the setting of the book is that its action takes place almost entirely within the borders of the United States of America, arguably the dominant force / manifestation of capitalism, both theory and practice, in the history of the planet. This ties setting quite closely to theme, in that one of the novel's key thematic arguments is that capitalism is destructive, corrupt, and soulless. Is the novel suggesting that America, as a capitalist society, is all those things as well? The point comes close to being unarguable, given that the action of the novel and the fates of almost all its characters reinforce the idea of capitalism's devastating effects.

The only noteworthy point at which the narrative leaves the United States are the sections that take place in Germany narrating Starbuck's developing relationship with

Ruth (mostly Chapters 1 and 2, with occasional glimpses throughout). The point here is that Germany in this context is portrayed as being essentially ruined, an important point for two reasons. The first is that the one true love of Starbuck's life, his wife Ruth, comes into existence here, meaning that setting combines with action to suggest the possibility of life and/or happiness and/or joy emerging from destruction. The second reason the German setting is important is implicit, rather than overt - Germany was destroyed because of its undying, blinkered, idealism (i.e., its faith in the message of the Nazis). There is the sense that the physical destruction of the setting simultaneously foreshadows the physical, moral and ethical destruction caused to the characters' lives as the result of American society's own idealism - i.e., its faith in the power and rewards of capitalism. Mary Kathleen's mind is destroyed by capitalism, there is the implication that the souls of millions of workers are also destroyed, and it could be argued that by concealing Mary Kathleen's will and thereby ensuring his own material (capitalistic) security, what little personal morality Starbuck actually has is also destroyed.

Language and Meaning

On one level, language and meaning throughout this book is tied closely to point of view, in that the author's use of language clearly and vividly evokes the sprawling, at times incoherent wanderings of the narrator's old mind. On another level, however, there are occasions when language is used in particularly telling ways. One of which is the way the author frequently injects references to The RAMJAC Corporation into what often seem to be irrelevant circumstances. The suggestion here is that capitalism (as manifest in the ever-reaching, ever-acquisitive, evermore wealthy RAMJAC) is inescapable and inevitable. Another telling use of language is the way the narrator, with what often seems to be similar irrelevance, injects the word "peace." This seems to be suggesting that the narrator has come to some kind of peace and/or contentment with what his life has been. There is also the sense, at times, that he has no choice but to do so - and, at other times, that he is not only reaching for peace, but that he is forcing himself to think of peace even in circumstances that seem to make no sense to him. In other words, he's forcing himself not to think about the repercussions of what's going on around him - an important and consistent character trait that seems to get him in trouble throughout his life (when he drops Leland Clewes' name at the senate hearing, and/or when he withholds Mary Kathleen's will). All in all, the frequent recurrences of "peace", both the word and the implied concept, suggest a certain resignation, almost a helplessness in the face of that which is larger than the individual life. Optimistic readers might see, in that, a reference to spiritual transcendence. On the other hand cynical readers, and in particular readers who agree with the book's points about the dangers of dominant capitalism and the associated futility of aspiring to communism might see the resignation implicit in the use of the word "peace" as a polite and/or tactful way of saying "It's hopeless. Accept it."

Structure

Structurally the narrative is anchored by a relatively straightforward through-line - Starbuck waits for his release from prison, he is released, he travels to New York, he has a life altering encounter with a former lover, and he lives that altered life until his circumstances change and he heads back to prison. Around that narrative line, the author constructs a rambling story that moves back and forth through time, from character to incident to meaning to insight and back again. On that level, therefore, the novel's fluid structure can be seen as manifesting the novel's thematically relevant attention to the idea of interconnection - past is connected to present, feeling is connected to idea, ideal is connected to action (failed or successful), people are connected to people. The core narrative line, meanwhile, suggests that in the middle of all this connection is one simple fact - a human being lives a single life from beginning to end.

Meanwhile, an intriguing structural question arises in consideration of the prologue. It's presented as a work of non-fiction separate from the narrative that follows (its pages are even numbered differently) but as previously discussed, it appears to contain a considerable amount of fictionalized material, much of which reappears in the decidedly fictional rest of the book. The implication here is again one of connection between structure and theme, only in this case the thematic point under consideration isn't one of interconnection, but one of the blurring of the lines between the real and the fictitious.

Quotes

"Kilgore Trout ... could not make it on the outside. That is no disgrace. A lot of good people can't make it on the outside." Prologue, p. ix

"[the photograph] was widely interpreted as showing how ashamed I was, haggard, horrified, unable to look anyone in the eye. It was in fact a photograph of a man who had just set his pants on fire." p. 7

"The shocking song, then, may really have been a way of honoring the powers of women, of dealing with the fears they inspired. It might properly be compared with a song making fun of lions, sung by lion hunters on a night before a hunt." p. 11

"...what is flirtatiousness but an argument that life must go on and on and on?" p. 24

"Nothing else in life is nearly so obsessive as war, war, war." p. 28

"'...the Nazis', [Ruth] said, '...understood God better than anyone. They knew how to make Him stay away.'" p. 29

"For all he knows about the social situation on earth, these carrion eaters may be members of the ruling class." P. 57

"I was grateful for the accident of privacy. I took advantage of it. I performed what was perhaps the most obscenely intimate physical act of my life. I gave birth to a broken, querulous little old man by doing this: by putting on my civilian clothes." p. 65

"I will say further, as an officer of an enormous international conglomerate, that nobody who is doing well in this economy ever even wonders what is really going on. We are chimpanzees. We are orangutans." p. 106

"And we might as well have been in Darkest Africa, for all anybody knew or cared about us any more. Most people, if they remembered us at all, believed us dead, I suppose. And we had never been as significant in American history as we had sometimes thought we were." p. 131

"No wonder [Mary Kathleen] dared not trust anybody. On this particular planet, where money mattered more than anything, the nicest person imaginable might suddenly get the idea of wringing her neck so that their loved ones might live in comfort. It would be the work of the moment - and easily forgotten as the years went by." p. 153

"The most embarrassing thing to me about this autobiography, surely, is its unbroken chain of proofs that I was never a serious man ... never have I risked my life, or even my comfort, in the service of mankind. Shame on me." p. 171

"...I am compelled to wonder if wisdom has ever existed or can ever exist. Might wisdom be as impossible in this particular universe as a perpetual motion machine?" p. 180.

"What is more protean than adultery? Nothing in this world." p. 202.

"'I hate this life," [Mary Kathleen] said. 'I've done everything I can to make it better for everybody, but there probably isn't that much that anybody can do. I've had enough of trying. I want to go to sleep now." p. 217

"Once again a multimillionaire was sending Walter F. Starbuck to his own tailor, to be made into a convincing counterfeit of a perfect gentleman." p. 224.

"The news, after all, could hardly have been worse. Foreigners and criminals and other endlessly greedy conglomerates were gobbling up RAMJAC. Mary Kathleen's legacy to the people was being converted to mountains of rapidly deteriorating currency, which were being squandered in turn on a huge new bureaucracy and on legal fees and on consultants' fees and on and on. What was left, it was said by the politicians, would help to pay the interest in the people's national debt, and would buy them more of the highways and public buildings and advanced weaponry they so richly deserved." p. 238.

Topics for Discussion

In what ways do the metaphoric associations of the name "Kilgore Trout" (see Prologue Analysis) manifest throughout the book? Specifically, in what ways does the novel explore the idea of layers of identity? In what ways does it explore one identity showing up in several (sometimes surprising/sometimes coincidental) ways?

In what way does the quote from the letter ostensibly written to the author (see "Prologue Summary") apply to the book's plot, theme, and/or central relationships?

Why does Ruth believe she would give birth to a monster? Discuss possible reasons why Starbuck's son turned out the way he did - or at least the way Starbuck says he did.

Discuss the symbolic/metaphoric value of the deterioration of the Arapahoe Hotel, once a symbol of opulence and home to those wishing to live an evidently capitalist life, into a grimy, broken down, barely inhabited porn palace.

Discuss the ways in which the visual/atmospheric contrast between the top of the Chrysler Building and the Grand Central cavern (Chapter 15, Summary and Analysis - also "Objects/Places").

Consider the image/description of harps in Chapter 16 (and discussed in Objects/Places). What is its symbolic/metaphoric value? Who and/or what does it represent? What meaning is given to that person/object by its likeness to the harp?

Discuss Starbuck's decision to withhold Mary Kathleen's will, taking into account his comments about avalanches at the beginning of the epilogue. What does he mean by avalanche? Do you think he was justified? Why or why not? What other motivations might there be for his decision? In what ways might this decision reflect the theme of the novel relating to the corruptive, disruptive power of capitalism?

On key occasions in the novel, Starbuck makes important choices and takes crucial actions based on his own feelings and ideas rather than those of others. One is his choice to court Ruth. Another is his choice to give Lewes' name to Nixon's committee. What are some of the other occasions? What are the consequences, both short and long term, of all three choices, not just in terms of event but in terms of their ultimate effect on Starbuck's life? How does the nature of those consequences relate to the novel's themes?

Consider Starbuck's comments that he has loved four women in his life in relation to Mary Kathleen's comment that he was born without a heart. From what you know of Starbuck, and also what you know of his relationships with those four women (his mother, Sarah, Mary Kathleen, and Ruth) would you say he truly loved any of them? If yes, which of them? Why? If no, why not? Would you say Mary Kathleen's observation is correct? Why or why not?

Discuss the relationship between Mary Kathleen's individual identity and her status as Mrs. Jack Graham Jr. - in other words, the fact that this die-hard communist is also a massive cog in the even more massive capitalist machine. How does this aspect of her character metaphorically and/or symbolically embody the novel's thematic attitude towards either/both capitalism and communism?