Jesus' Son: Stories Study Guide

Jesus' Son: Stories by Denis Johnson

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Story 1

Story 1 Summary

This collection of (sometimes very) short stories explores the drug-influenced (induced?) experiences of their anonymous narrator, a young man living and surviving the turbulent early-1970s in America. While the individual stories vividly portray a series of intense encounters with death, desire and despair, the collection as a whole explores (stylistically, linguistically, and narratively) themes relating to the need for and value of human contact, the tension between hopelessness and compassion, and the pervasive effect of drug use and addiction.

"Car Crash While Hitchhiking"

The story begins with a description of the three people the narrator rode with at the beginning of his journey - a salesman, a Cherokee Indian, and a college student. He describes how he and each of these people consumed alcohol and a variety of drugs, and suggests that somehow, he knew about the next car to pick him up (see "Quotes," p. 3). He describes the caution with which the man at the wheel of that car drove, briefly recollects a few more details of his previous rides, describes the bad weather that night, and comments that he, like the baby lying un-secured in the back seat of the car, was asleep when the car was in an accident. "A liquid," the narrator writes, "which I knew right away was human blood flew around the car and rained on my head." He describes the driver's angry reaction to his wife's unconsciousness, his own wandering the highway with the baby in his arms in search of help, his observations of a dying man in the second vehicle in the accident (see "Quotes," p. 8), and his conversation with a passing trucker, who seems reluctant (to say the least) to get involved. The narrator is taken to a hospital, where he refuses treatment and becomes fascinated with the reactions of other survivors - in particular, the wife of the dying man (see "Quote," p. 9). The story ends with the narrator's hallucinogenic description of the atmosphere of the hospital and of his lying to the doctors about his state of mind. "And you," he writes, "you ridiculous people, you expect me to help you."

Story 1 Analysis

Each of the stories in this collection, in its own way, dramatizes and explores each of the collection's three themes (see "Themes"). For consideration of this aspect of each story, see "Topics for Discussion - Consider each story in turn ..."

Within each story, however, there are particularly vivid images and mini-explorations, if you will, of mini-themes. In this story, the most telling image is the one quoted - that of the narrator being showered with human blood. Is this, perhaps, a vivid evocation of a situation that occurs for—and to—him several times throughout the book, being "showered" with the shed spiritual blood of human frailty, failing, and suffering? In terms

of mini-themes, there is the sense here that the family's survival, and the death of the man whose car they are in collision with, seem evocative of the randomness of existence, specifically, the randomness of both life and death. Meanwhile, the wife's grief can be seen, through the narrator's perspective, as a manifestation of nature - not just human nature, but the raw power and emotion associated with simply existing. The narrator's admiration of that power and feeling can perhaps be related to his own inability and/or unwillingness to feel either, an idea supported by the fact that he rarely, if ever, portrays his own emotions, let alone strong emotion. This might, in turn be seen as at least part of the motivation and/or result of his heavy, obsessive drug use.

Finally, the passive reaction of the trucker can perhaps be seen as a metaphoric representation of humanity's self-preservational ambivalence towards those whose needs and/or despair don't coincide with their own.

Story 2

Story 2 Summary

"Two Men" The narrator describes how he and two buddies, Richard and Tom (one of whom was hurt and eventually arrested during a robbery the three of them were conducting - see "Quotes," p. 13) discovered "the first man" in the back seat of their car as they were leaving a dance. After describing how he had to leave the dance quickly out of fear of a man (Caplan) whose woman he (the narrator) had flirted with, the narrator then describes how the man in the back of the car, apparently deaf, used gestures to tell him where to take him.

The narrator, Richard and Tom take the man to three different places. At the first, a woman inside threatens to call the police, and the narrator reacts fearfully when cars pass, still worried about the man from the dance (Caplan) he believes is pursuing him out of jealous anger. Richard and Tom convince the narrator to try to leave the first man behind, but he (the man) is so physically strong that he intimidates his way into the back seat. Conversation reveals that the brakes on the car are broken, but the emergency brake still works (see "Objects/Places - The Narrator's Car"). They take the man to a second house, which proves to be empty. After referring in passing to a wife and child at home that he seems to be avoiding (see "Quotes," p. 19), the narrator then takes the man to a third house, where the group is greeted by a woman "with her mascara blurred and her lipstick kissed away." She and a couple of large, well built male friends reveal the man's name (Stan) and that they don't want him around, their language and demeanor revealing that they're all on drugs. Again, the narrator, Richard and Tom attempt to leave Stan behind, but he retains his hold on the car door even as they're driving away. Eventually, the narrator accidentally runs Stan into a stop sign, which crumples and which causes Stan to break his grip on the car.

Free of Stan, the narrator starts to go after Caplan so he can get their confrontation over with, but Richard and Tom convince him not to. As they're driving past a gas station, though, the narrator spots a man (Thatcher) who the narrator says sold him a bad batch of drugs. He (the narrator) pulls out his gun and goes after him, chasing him down streets, through an alley, and into a dirty apartment, where Thatcher's woman attempts to stall them by telling them he isn't there and that there are children in the next room. As the narrator holds the gun to her head, Richard "suddenly and stupidly" goes down the hall in search of Thatcher. "Flagrant, self-destructive gestures," the narrator writes. "He was known for them. Richard comes back with the news that Thatcher has gone. The narrator tells the woman that she's "going to be sorry."

Story 2 Analysis

Again, for consideration of this story's exploration of the collection's three themes, see "Topics for Discussion - Consider each story in turn ..."

An interesting question arises upon consideration of both the title and content of this story - who are the two men, Stan and Thatcher or Richard and Tom? The most obvious answer is that it's the former, since they play a more dominant role in the action than the other two. It must be remembered, however, that the influence and/or presence of Richard and Tom is what drives the narrator to do what he does. On a technical level, because the narrative essentially begins and ends with references to Richard and to Tom, it would be reasonable for a reader to conclude that on some level, the story is in fact about them and their relationship with the narrator. Of course, it could always be about both sets of men ...

Another interesting question: Is Richard or Tom the man the narrator refers to at the beginning of the story as having been injured and arrested? The evidence of the story's final moments (in which Richard is described as doing something "suddenly and stupidly," a "flagrant, self-destructive" act). This suggests that the man referred to is him - he is portrayed (albeit briefly) as being reckless, and recklessness is the kind of thing that might get a robber injured and/or arrested.

However, the most interesting thing about this story is its portrayal of the narrator's violent side. Nowhere else in this collection does this aspect of his personality emerge - he does violence to himself (through the use of drugs and alcohol, as well as getting himself involved in intense relationship conflicts), but only in this story is his capacity for violence directed outwardly, towards others. For further consideration of this aspect of the story, see "Topics for Discussion - What is your interpretation of ..."

Particularly effective imagery in this story includes the comment about the woman with her lipstick "kissed off," with its evocation of combined carelessness and passion, and the narrator (accidentally?) running Stan into a stop sign, a comically ironic image since neither of them seems able to "stop" on their own.

Stories 3 and 4

Stories 3 and 4 Summary

"Out on Bail"

This story begins with the narrator's description of his encounter (at a bar called The Vine) with a young man named Jack Hotel, whom he believes to be about be convicted of armed robbery. After describing his feelings about the safety and familiarity of The Vine (see "Quotes," p. 32), he recounts his realization that night that Hotel was actually celebrating being acquitted, describes how the police told Hotel to leave town, and reveals that a couple of years later Hotel came back, unable to stay away from his girlfriend.

That night, the narrator says, he and Hotel found each other in another bar. The Vine, he writes, had been torn down. He (the narrator) describes how both men had just been thrown out by their girlfriends, how he (the narrator) and Hotel stole and cashed the social security check of a dead man, and how they used the money to buy drugs, which they shared out equally. He describes how he took too much of the drugs and almost overdosed (see "Quotes," p. 34), but was saved by his watchful girlfriend and their friends. The story concludes with the narrator's confession that Hotel also overdosed, but in spite of initial efforts by friends to make sure he was alive, he eventually died. The hotel "simply went under," the narrator writes. "He died. I am still alive."

"Dundun"

The narrator arrives at the farmhouse of a friend looking for some opium, and discovers that one of his acquaintances, Dundun, has shot another acquaintance, McInnes. Two women, Beatle and Blue, are also at the farmhouse, but don't really play any role in the action. Jack Hotel is also there. The narrator discovers that McInnes has been shot in the stomach and is still alive, but that Dundun has already used up the opium he got for his birthday - his twenty first birthday, that same day.

The narrator and Dundun start to drive McInnes into a hospital (see "Quotes," p. 39), with conversation referring to how the brakes on this car aren't working, but the emergency brake is (see "Objects/Places - The Narrator's Car"). As the trio is driving through parched, barren fields, McInnes dies. Dundun and the narrator throw him out of the car.

The narrator then describes the violence Dundun did to Jack Hotel and several other people later in his life, and how that violence led him to end up in jail. The story concludes with the narrator making a kind of plea for the reader to have compassion for Dundun (see "Quotes," p. 42).

Stories 3 and 4 Analysis

The book's themes relating to drug use/addiction, the value of human contact, and the tension between despair and compassion are all vividly explored in these two stories. See "Topics for Discussion - Consider each story ..."

Meanwhile, there is an interesting juxtaposition of settings here - specifically, the friendly safety of The Vine (in "Out on Bail") and the hostile, unwelcoming starkness of rural Iowa (in "Dundun"). This is an interesting example of how setting can be evocative and/or illuminating of action and theme - the atmosphere of The Vine evokes the safety and care the narrator experiences at the hands of his friends after his overdose, while the unwelcoming atmosphere of the Iowan fields is evocative of the stark ruthlessness in McInnes. For further consideration of these two settings, see "Objects/Places - The Vine" and "Iowa").

The most noteworthy element of these two stories is the concluding line of "Out on Bail" - the reference to Jack Hotel having died while the narrator is "still alive". There is a fairly obvious connection here between the author's life and the compassion he experiences from his friends, a clear manifestation of the book's overall thematic contention that such compassion is a valuable and essential aspect of human existence, not to mention individual survival in a world where threats to that survival come from both outside and within.

Story 5

Story 5 Summary

"Work"

The narrator describes a complicated, happy/violent, drug-influenced weekend he spent with his beautiful girlfriend at a Holiday Inn - and how, after one too many fights, he left the hotel, took a bus (leaving his girlfriend on the sidewalk), and took refuge at The Vine. There he encounters his buddy Wayne, who takes him along on an expedition to make some money. They go out to a housing development damaged by flooding and therefore abandoned, where they steal the wiring out of a house that Wayne says is his. The plan is to sell the copper in the wiring and gain some cash.

As they're pulling wiring out of the walls, Wayne and the narrator are distracted by the vision of a nude woman air-sailing behind a speedboat. On their way back home, Wayne detours to a farmhouse, where he has a conversation with a woman that the narrator eventually realizes is the same woman, who Wayne says is his wife. "As nearly as I could tell," the narrator says, "I'd wandered into some sort of dream that Wayne was having about his wife, and his house. But I didn't say anything more about it...", adding that whether it was "somebody else's dream or not", it was the happiest day of his life.

When the narrator and Wayne return to The Vine, Wayne insists on buying the narrator's drinks, calling it a "sacrifice". This leads the narrator to recall what he believes to have been a real sacrifice - Wayne standing up to a large, angry gambler, and winning. This, in turn, leads the narrator to a memory of surging happiness after making love with his first wife, a happiness that subsided into a quiet peace similar to that after Wayne faced down the gambler, and to the happiness he experienced the afternoon of the taking of the wire (see "Quotes," p. 53). Part of that happiness, the narrator writes, was the bartender's graceful generosity with the liquor. He adds that he will never forget her. "Your husband," he writes, "will beat you with an extension cord and the bus will pull away leaving you standing there in tears, but you were my mother."

Story 5 Analysis

Important elements in this story include the deepening and defining of the metaphoric value of The Vine (see "Objects/Places"), the narrator's experience of peace and happiness resulting from the companionable time he spent with Wayne (see "Themes - The Need for, and Value of, Human Contact"), and the contrast between the narrator's relationships between the three women who appear here.

The key thing to note about those relationships is that all three of the women - girlfriend, Wayne's wife, bartender - are nameless. In fact, of all the women who move in and out of the pages of these stories, only one is actually given a name - Michelle, the mother of the narrator's (aborted) child in "Dirty Wedding." Some readers might consider this a

manifestation of an essential misogyny in the narrator, and perhaps even the author. There is certainly validity to this argument - almost all the secondary male characters are given names, suggesting that what the narrator gains from his relationships with them has more value. It must also be remembered, however, that a good percentage of the women are portrayed positively - the bartender here, the narrator's lovers and the Mennonite wife in "Beverly Hotel", the teenage dancer in "Happy Hour" - which is more than can be said for many of the secondary male characters. The suggestion here is that the portrayal of women throughout the collection is more archetypal than individualized, more representative of universal aspects of femininity, both positive and negative, than of particular women.

The idea that women in general and the bartender in particular are archetypal portrayals is born out by the story's last couple of lines. It's true that the narrator has no real knowledge of the bartender's identity - for example, whether she really is married or whether her husband beats her, let alone with an extension cord. There is, however, the ring of specific, experienced, lived truth about this image - in other words, the sense that the narrator knows, and cares for, a woman who has been beaten with an extension cord. Meanwhile, the narrator's reference to a bus pulling away is a clear and apparently deliberate reference to the narrator's confrontation with his girlfriend at the beginning of the story. Finally, the narrator's reference to his mother hints at the idea that the bartender's compassion reminds him of his mother's (although it's doubtful his mother expressed that compassion by pouring double shots of alcohol, although one never knows). In short, the story's final lines suggest a kind of archetypal womanhood, a universality communicated through specifics - the idea that the bartender lives and embodies the varied characteristics (suffering? patience? compassion?) lived and embodied in all women.

For consideration of why Michelle is the only woman in the collection actually named, see "Story 7 (Dirty Wedding) Analysis."

Story 6

Story 6 Summary

"Emergency"

The narrator sets this story in the late summer of 1973, when he had been working in a hospital emergency room for a few weeks and had befriended an orderly named Georgie. Georgie, as the narrator describes him, regularly steals pills out of the medication stores, uses them, and as an example of how he is affected by his drug use, hallucinates blood on the floors even when he's cleaned it all up.

One night, a patient name Terrence comes into the emergency room with a knife sticking into the corner of his eye and through to his brain. As the chief nurse and the on-duty doctor decide what to do, Georgie prepares the patient for surgery and calmly takes the knife out of his eye. Terrence, it later turns out, can see out of that eye perfectly.

Later, Georgie and the narrator drive through the countryside, stoned on pills and in search of a county fair. They run over a pregnant jackrabbit and take the barely alive unborn babies along with them, Georgie using Terrence's knife to cut them out of the mother's belly and saying they can be raised to the size of gorillas. The weather turns snowy and windy, and Georgie drives his truck into a drive-in movie theater, where he, the narrator and the rabbits spend the night. The next morning, after a night of various and sometimes frightening hallucinations, Georgie and the narrator wake up to discover that the rabbits have died. They make their way back to town, picking up a hitchhiker (Hardee) along the way. Conversation reveals that the narrator and Hardee know each other, and that Hardee is AWOL from the army and is desperate to get to Canada. "That world," the narrator comments. "These days it's all been erased and they've rolled it up like a scroll and put it away somewhere. Yes, I can touch it with my fingers. But where is it?"

When Hardee asks Georgie what he does for a living, Georgie says "I save lives."

Story 6 Analysis

Like many of the titles in this collection, the title of this story carries with it varied layers of meaning. The first is perhaps the most obvious, the fact that the narrator and Georgie work in an emergency room. The second is the irony of the title's relationship to the emergency experienced by Terrence, which doesn't turn out to be an emergency after all. The third is the emergency of the unborn baby rabbits, the ultimate mishandling of which evokes the narrator's and Georgie's drug-influenced inability to cope with a real emergency. The fourth is Hardee's emergency, in that he's sought by the military for what amounts to desertion, and is desperate to get to the safety of Canada (the war at the time is the Vietnam War, a period in American history in which large numbers of

young men, many the product of the hippie counter-culture, dodged military service). The fifth, and perhaps most metaphoric, is the sense of emergency evoked by the narrator's reference to the past. There is a feeling of urgent searching, of an emergency-like need to both recall and define an evidently lost and/or forgotten past. Finally, there is emergency-related irony, not to mention black humor, in Georgie's comment that he saves lives. From what the reader has seen, Georgie is not only incompetent (when it comes to the saving of the rabbit's lives) but lucky (when it comes to the pulling out of the knife). There is the strong sense, supported by Georgie's drug use, that if push came to shove in a real emergency, he would be unable to cope.

Again, for further consideration of the collection's three general themes and their relationship to this story, see "Topics for Discussion - Consider each story in turn ..."

Story 7

Story 7 Summary

"Dirty Wedding" The narrator describes his preference for sitting at the front of a train and being able to watch the world as it passes by. He then narrates a series of train rides, the first being with his girlfriend Michelle to an abortion clinic, where his crudity gets him kicked out. On the second, he becomes fascinated with a stranger, and follows him off the train into a Laundromat. As the man peels off his shirt to wash it, the narrator gets an erection, and is surprised to learn that he can feel sexually aroused by men. Michelle, he writes, gets sexually involved with both men and women.

On the third train trip, the narrator meets a young woman stoned on what looks like very good drugs. "I know there are people," the narrator says, "who believe that wherever you look, all you see is yourself. Episodes like this make me wonder if they aren't right." After the narrator asks her if she can help him get some of what she's on, the woman takes him to the seedy Savoy Hotel, where someone takes the narrator's money and "goes upstairs." The narrative isn't clear on whether he gets his drugs.

The narrative then returns its focus to Michelle - how she left the narrator for a man named John Smith, how she accidentally overdosed, how Smith hallucinated her calling to him "from the other side of life," and how Smith himself died from an overdose. The narrator recalls an argument with Michelle on his twenty fourth birthday, an argument during which she shot at him (see "Quotes," p. 84).

The story concludes with a reference to how the idea of abortion triggers a lot of debate, and the narrator's comment that "it wasn't what the lawyers did. It wasn't what the doctors did, it wasn't what the woman did. It was the mother and father did together."

Story 7 Analysis

The most interesting element of this story is the previously discussed fact that Michelle is the only female character in the collection to actually be given a name. There is no clear, explicitly defined reason for this, but giving this particular woman a name suggests that there is something about her particular relationship with the narrator that is particularly important, specifically the fact that she had an abortion.

The first point to note here is that there is no real discussion of the circumstances of the abortion - who wanted it, whether there was argument about whether to have it, etc. The final lines indicate that the narrator is prepared to share at least some responsibility for the situation, but whether the phrase "did together" refers to the sex act of begetting the child or the decision to have an abortion is unclear. It's also important to consider the idea that the narrator in each of the stories is the same man (see "Characters - The Narrator"). If this is indeed the case, then the abortion somehow relates to the circumstance referred to in "Two Men," that of the narrator having a wife and child he

wants to avoid. In other words, the previously discussed sense of responsibility seems to extend only so far. The third point to consider is the narrator's self-portrayed attitudes towards both Michelle and the abortion, which are at least callous and at most cruel. The fact that he mentions them at all suggests that he at least knows he was cruel, but offers no hints as to whether he actually regrets his cruelty.

In summary, the circumstances of this story, as related to other circumstances in the collection, suggest that Michelle is named because this particular circumstance is/was more important to the narrator than his experiences with other women and presumably with his other child. Is this because he was awakened to a sense of responsibility? Because he has become aware of the pain caused by his abdication of that responsibility (by going off with the two strangers on the train?) Or because he failed to realize the opportunity to practice the kind of thematically relevant compassion and/or connection with a fellow human being (i.e., Michelle) that he finds so welcome in the bartender at The Vine and in his various relationships he participates in and/or encounters in "Beverly Home?" There is the strong sense that the choice and/or interpretation of this circumstance is left to the reader.

Meanwhile, it's interesting to consider how the portrayal of Michelle, including her being given a name, relates to the overall portrayal of women throughout the collection - specifically, the quote from p. 84 which seems to refer back to the narrator's comments about the bartender at The Vine at the end of Story 5 ("Work"). Like those comments, the comments on p. 84 (see "Quotes") carry with them the sense of archetypal womanhood, of the narrator finding points of unity between his romantic intimacies with women like Michelle and non romantic but similar intimacies experienced with his mother. In other words, the key point is the intimacy between male and female, a perhaps archetypal manifestation of two of the narrative's central themes - the need/value of human contact and the tension between desperation and compassion.

For consideration of the possible levels of meaning to the story's title, see "Topics for Discussion - What relationships does the title ..."

Story 8

Story 8 Summary

"The Other Man"

The first part of this story is taken up with a description of the man the narrator says is the second man from "Two Men," whom he says he never described. He encountered this man, who remains nameless, on a west coast ferry, where they struck up a conversation over beer. The man has an Eastern European accent and claims at first to be from Poland, but later says he's from Cleveland, making the playful stories he told about evading the Polish police on his motorcycle something other than pure truth.

The narrator then describes how he went to visit a pair of friends, but wasn't able to get into their apartment. He describes how, on his search for a place to wait for them, he passed a hospital where he saw two men together on a terrace (see "Quotes," p. 91). Eventually, the narrator goes into a bar called Kelly's, where he becomes immediately attracted to a short, drunk, woman who tells him she's in the army. As they slow dance, they become more and more sexually interested in each other. When they discuss going somewhere to make love, the woman reveals not only that she's married, but that her wedding day was only a few days before. She tells the narrator that she could introduce him to her husband as some kind of relative. At first the narrator resists, but then kisses her and seems to give in (see "Quotes," p. 93).

Story 8 Analysis

Again, there are several layers of meaning to the title of this story. The term "other man" could refer to the "other man" with whom the narrator has an apparently casual conversation, to the "other man" from "Two Men" (in which case the man, unnamed here, is actually named Thatcher), or to the husband of the woman in the bar. It could even refer to the narrator himself, the "other man" in the relationship between the woman and her husband.

A related point is the brief narrative glimpse of the two men in the hospital, men (as the narrative indicates) brought together by common circumstances rather than by common interests who, when those circumstances come to an end, will go their separate ways. This is evocative/representative of several male/male relationships throughout the collection, all between the narrator and another man - the men he encounters at the scene of the car crash, Jack Hotel, Dundun, Wayne, Georgie, Bill (in "Steady Hands ..."), perhaps even the Mennonite husband (in "Beverly Home"). The point made is not necessarily a negative one, but could perhaps be seen as an evocation of compassion and/or connection - while fleeting, it is nevertheless affirming and sustaining.

Finally, the relationship between the narrator and the military wife is interesting on a couple of levels - because the woman is the aggressor (in his other relationships, the narrator seems to be the one pursuing the relationship), because of its circumstance, and because of its vivid mutual desperation (see "Themes - The Tension Between Desperation and Compassion"). The thematically relevant question, of course, is whether the narrator gives in to his desire for her out of his own desperation, his emerging sense of compassion, or some combination of both.

Stories 9 and 10

Stories 9 and 10 Summary

"Happy Hour"

The narrator searches through Seattle for "a seventeen year old belly dancer" he's attracted to, looking for ways to fill the time until Happy Hour arrives. He describes a confrontation with a Native American, his memories of sleeping/waking up next to the dancer (Angelique), and his giving her roommates some money to go buy drugs but seeing them smash up their car and wander away dazed.

The narrator then describes riding a bus for hours, again, in an effort to fill time until Happy Hour. Eventually he gets kicked off the bus for having no destination and goes to the library. "All this time," he adds, he "kept [his] eye open for the belly dancer", referring to her vulnerability and beauty (see "Quotes," p.100). He eventually goes into a bar, recalling as he does the violent impulse he suppressed when an old man at the library told him his fly was undone. At the bar, a conversation with "a uniformed nurse with a black eye" results in the narrator purchasing an extremely large pill, which the nurse says contains ground-up hallucinogens. The narrator takes the pill, comparing it in size to a horse pill.

"Steady Hands at Seattle General"

The narrator, apparently a patient at Seattle General Hospital, presents a conversation between him and his then-roommate Bill, also a patient. As the narrator shaves Bill, he (the narrator) notices that Bill has a pair of scars on his cheeks, and is surprised to discover that they are from being shot - the bullet entered one cheek, and exited the other (see "Quotes," p. 108). Bill also says he remembers the dream he had while he was unconscious from the shot, but evades telling the author its content, saying that it's indelibly associated with the traumatic memory of the shot. As Bill looks in the mirror once the shave is complete, the narrator asks him what he sees when he (Bill) looks into the past. "Wrecked cars," Bill says, and adds that the people inside them "are just meat now". When the narrator asks "is that really how it is?" Bill comments that he has no idea, adding that he just got there (the hospital). The two men argue over whether being in the hospital is a good thing (see "Quotes," p. 111).

Stories 9 and 10 Analysis

If there is a narrative line connecting these stories (as opposed to a commonality of themes), it seems to become apparent in this section as the narrator moves closer to an experience of human connection, a movement that culminates in the relationships portrayed in "Beverly Home". In both stories here, the narrator is actively searching, reaching out for some kind of non-drug related contact (as opposed to having the contact simply happen to him, which is the case with the other stories - his efforts to

connect with the man in "Dirty Wedding" don't really count, since that's less about connection and more about curiosity). Granted, the search in "Happy Hour" is transitional - the search is less about connection than it is about distraction, but the connection is still there, and at least he is making some attempt to find distraction from his addiction. In the other stories, the addiction is front and center. Yes he gives in to his addiction at the end of the story, as he accepts the pill - but there is nevertheless the sense that he is on his way somewhere ... to the aptly, and metaphorically, named "Beverly Home."

Meanwhile, it's important to note the small detail about the narrator's resistance to violence, a situation in clear (deliberate?) opposition to his deliberate acts of violence in "Two Men", his accidental act of violence towards the baby rabbits in "Emergency," and his emotional/verbal violence towards Michelle in "Dirty Wedding." It's possible to see this choice, in fact, as a manifestation of his movement towards a more compassionate perspective. In other words, it is another indication of his movement towards a healthier, more integrated self.

As is the case with many of the other stories in the collection, there is a certain irony in the title of the story "Happy Hour" - as, in fact, there is in the phrase and/or the concept of happy hour in the first place. In the specific case of this narrative "happy hour" isn't really happy at all - it is, in fact, representative of a drug and/or alcohol induced oblivion which is ultimately an escape from reality in which the happiness is only an illusion. Whether this idea also applies to the concept in general is perhaps a subject for another discussion or analysis.

The narrator's search for connection is more successful in "Steady Hands ...", in which he seems to be making an effort to establish a real connection with the man who is trusting him to be safe with the weapon-like razor shave him safely (is this the first time the narrator is so openly trusted? Hmm ...) Interesting elements here include Bill's sub-textual contention (implied in his unwillingness to talk about his dream) that the haunting past must be kept in its place, and perhaps most importantly his reference to car crashes, which carries with it an undeniable echo of the first story in the collection. The point of the reference, however, seems to be an ironic one. Where Bill sees the victims of a car crash as "just meat," the thematic contention of the collection, and of each story, seems to be that on some level the narrator did not see the people in the crash he experienced as "just meat," but that he in fact sees them as human beings deserving of compassion and connection. In other words, his conversation with Bill moves him further along his journey towards his compassionate, connected "home" by showing what, and how, not to be.

Story 11

Story 11 Summary

"Beverly Home" This story begins with a selection of vignettes - of the narrator's regular lunchtime visits to a nursery across the street from his place of employment, of his experience of sudden desert storms, of his ambivalence about having a job (see "Quotes," p. 116), and of his reflections on the "beautiful, sonorous name" Beverly. This, he writes, was the name of the "turquoise blue hospital for the aged" where he worked - the Beverly Home. The home, he says, was where all sorts of mentally and/or emotionally and/or physically compromised people lived out their lives in an environment where someone other than their families looked after them.

The narrator describes how, one day when he was walking home, he heard a woman singing, followed the sound, and saw the woman getting out of her shower, drying off, and dressing. He describes how watching this woman, who apparently showered at the same time every day, became a part of his daily routine, much like his job responsibilities (which included writing and reproducing the home newsletter). He counterpoints his descriptions of both the showering woman and the newsletter with a description of a woman he was sexually involved with - she, he writes, had a normally sized torso but dwarf-like arms and legs. They had sex frequently, he writes, but didn't do much more (see "Quotes," p. 122).

When he returns his attention to the singing woman, the narrator describes how he avoided being seen by her husband, how he discovered they were Mennonites, how he fantasized about taking her away into a new life, and how he became obsessed with seeing them have sex. He comments on how he came to feel more and more comfortable at the Home (see "Quotes," p. 126), attended meetings of Alcoholics Anonymous, and became increasingly frustrated at not seeing the Mennonite couple make love. At one point, he hears what he thinks are the sounds of lovemaking but which he discovers are the sounds of an argument. As he stands close to the curtained window, the wife suddenly opens the curtains, putting them face to face. He is, however, invisible to her - "it was dark out," he writes, "and she could only have been looking at her own reflection, not at me." He is nevertheless able to see the tears on her cheeks and the sadness in her eyes, sadness which goes away when her husband comes in and, in an apparent act of apology and contrition, washes her feet.

At that point, the narrator reveals that he had stopped seeing the woman with the short arms and legs and had begun spending time with a woman half-paralyzed by a childhood bout with encephalitis. He describes how comfortable they are with each other, naked in the kitchen, having breakfast after a night of lovemaking, and how she told him she had had a number of lovers, many of whom had died under tragic circumstances. "I was full of a sweet pity for them as we lay in the sunny little room," he writes, "sad that they would never live again, drunk with sadness, I couldn't get enough of it."

The story concludes with the narrator's description of being regularly present during shift change at the Home, when incoming and outgoing workers traded stories about themselves. He describes a growing personal contentment, emerging in spite of (in the wake of?) strange symptoms caused by the drugs designed to help him off heroin. "All these weirdos," he writes, "and me getting a little better every day right in the midst of them. I had never known, never even imagined for a heartbeat, that there might be a place for people like us."

Story 11 Analysis

There are several noteworthy elements in this section. First, there is a sense of climax about this piece, a sense that even though the book isn't a novel, the narrator has arrived at a place of completion, of transformation, and above all of confrontation - with his desires, with a personal truth, with himself. In other words, he has left (or at least is in the process of leaving) an old self behind and taking his life in a new direction.

The second noteworthy point here concerns the two sexually intimate relationships in which the narrator engages, a point itself noteworthy for two reasons. The first is that the narrator and the women have something in common - he's spiritually and emotionally disabled, they're physically disabled. It may be, in fact, that these two relationships can be seen as each involving two people helping the other believe they're not as unattractive as they've come to believe. The second noteworthy point about these relationships is that the narrator experiences a kind of emotional growth as he emerges from one to the other. In terms of the first, he clearly states that he's not interested in anything other than a purely physical relationship, while in terms of the second he's advanced into a deeper emotional intimacy. In short, his fulfillment of his need for human contact seems to be taking on increased meaning and depth. This point is connected to the first, in that this growth is part of his moving his life into a new direction.

The third noteworthy point about this chapter is the resonance that exists between the narrator's comments about his second lover's dead boyfriends and his comment at the end of "Out on Bail" - specifically, the idea that he is dead and that someone else is not. There is the sense about both these references, but about the reference here in particular, that he is reminding himself of an important fact, that he has survived, perhaps even that there is something more for him to be doing with his life and himself than using drugs. There is also a sense of resonance between the narrator's description of the home and his description of The Vine. Both come across as places of refuge and safety, as places that will welcome "people like us", people who for whatever reason and in whatever way are unable to live life in the same way that "normal" people do.

The most interesting thing about this chapter is the complex, multi-textured "relationship" that develops between the narrator and the young Mennonite couple. At first it seems as though he is becoming as addicted to the idea of their having sex, and specifically of the young wife being sexual, as he is (was?) to drugs and alcohol. In other words, it's almost as though his obsession with her is being used to avoid reality in

the same way as his obsession with intoxicating substances. Later, however, the narrative makes it clear that the Mennonite couple and their relationship is both an important catalyst in the narrator's personal transformation, as well as a very telling evocation of the narrative's themes relating to the need for/value of human contact (the contact between them, and their contact with the narrator).

A particularly telling image, appearing in the narrative of the Mennonite couple, is that of the wife's staring into the night, unaware that she is inches from the face of the narrator. This is symbolically relevant because each, in his/her own way, is looking for comfort, reassurance, a sense of wholeness and belonging. Granted, the suffering experienced by the wife seems to be of much shorter duration than that of the narrator, but the fact remains that they are looking for the same thing. As the image suggests, they are mirror images of each other. The final point to note in relation to the portrayal of the Mennonite couple is the reference to the husband washing the wife's feet. There is a famous passage in the New Testament of the Christian Bible in which Christ demonstrates the value of humility to his disciples by washing their feet. By washing his wife's feet, the Mennonite husband is following the Christ-like teaching and/or example of demonstrating humility, which is in turn a manifestation of the book's two main thematic emphases, on compassion and on human connection.

Finally, for consideration of the various resonances associated with the word "home" in the story's title, see "Topics for Discussion - What are the different layers ..."

Characters

The Narratorappears in All Stories

In the collection as a whole, and in the individual stories, there is very little information about who is speaking. Some things seem very clear - that all the stories are being told by the same person, that that person is male, that he is a heavy drug user, that he's relatively young (in his early twenties) and that he is less than successful at sustaining relationships with women. Other than that, there are very few details - little or no sense of childhood background, of the forces that shaped and/or defined him (and in particular his drug use), or of the forces that have apparently moved him away from drug use and into a clearer mindset. He is, for example, never referred to by name. He is occasionally referred to by his nickname, Fuckhead, a derogatory epithet that, in the minds of both the narrator and the friends who call him by that name, very clearly defines him as someone who makes stupid mistakes.

On a more sub-textual, implied level, the reader gets the impression that the narrator is struggling to keep a deep, desperate loneliness at bay - that he is searching for a physical, spiritual and sexual home. This impression results from the almost reverence with which the narrator frequently refers to the safety and friendliness of The Vine (see "Objects/Places"), the portrayal of himself in his few friendships (particularly with Georgie, Wayne, and Jack Hotel) as seeming almost desperate for companionship, and even from his near-obsession with the Mennonite couple in "Beverly Hotel." It's important to note, however, that in spite of this apparent loneliness he also, and just as clearly, is reluctant and/or unable to get too close to people, particularly women. In "Dirty Wedding," for example, he seems to be deliberately antagonizing the vulnerable Michelle, while in "Beverly Hotel" he clearly indicates that he's keeping both the women he becomes involved with at a distance.

It's also important to note that there is also the strong sense that the stories are being told with a degree of distance from the events they're describing - distance not only in terms of being older, but also in terms of perhaps being wiser, possibly less lonely, certainly more straight and/or sober. There is the a strong sense of reminiscence about these stories, almost nostalgia, perhaps even a bit of bemusement, as though the narrator can't quite believe his younger self did the things he's writing about (see "Style - Tone").

The Family in the Accidentappears in Car Crash While Hitchhiking

The family consists of a father, mother and baby. Only the mother is given a name - Janice - and all three survive the accident. The father is portrayed as being strangely, perhaps illogically, angry at the fact that his wife is unconscious. At the beginning of the narrator's encounter with them, the father is portrayed as being cautious about driving in

bad conditions, perhaps a bit too much so. After the accident, he is portrayed as being strangely, perhaps illogically, angry at the fact that his wife is unconscious. The baby is portrayed as being innocently bewildered by what's happened, and perfectly safe. The mother is given no distinguishing characteristics.

The Dead Man and his Wifeappears in Car Crash While Hitchhiking

The unnamed dead man is the driver of the car that collides with the vehicle in which the narrator is riding. He is first seen by the narrator at the scene, severely injured but still alive - although somehow, the narrator (perhaps through drug-heightened instincts) knows he's going to die ... which he does, on the way to hospital. His unnamed wife appears only briefly, also at the hospital, where she is portrayed as initially being quite self-possessed, but later, when she hears of her husband's death, she experiences a tearing grief that the narrator seems to admire for its intensity, its very existence (see "Quotes," p. 9).

The Truckerappears in Car Crash While Hitchhiking

The trucker encountered by the narrator during his search for help after the accident is ambivalent (at best), negative (at worst) about getting involved. His casual but quite evident lack of compassion is perhaps one of the darkest, most chilling elements of the story.

Richard and Tomappears in Two Men

The narrator's two buddies don't have many distinguishing characteristics - both are cynical, and both seem more interested in self-preservation than in compassion or altruism, which means that on some level both are projections/externalizations of those characteristics in the narrator. At the end of the story Richard seems to be the more reckless of the two friends, the more edgy, a quality that has echoes in the narrator's apparent willingness to indulge in violence.

Stan and Thatcherappears in Two Men

Stan and Thatcher are the two men encountered by the narrator and his buddies on the night that is the focus of the story. The individualized identities of the men aren't that deeply defined, with the ostensibly mute Stan eventually being revealed (by the nature and words of his friends) to be a user and manipulator, perfectly able to communicate. Thatcher is given even less of a character, being defined only by the narrator's perspective that he (Thatcher) sold him (the narrator) a bad batch of drugs. A later story in the collection (The Other Man) apparently provides more information about who

Thatcher is, but because the man in that story is never actually named, it's not a hundred percent certain that the two men are the same.

Caplan and Alsatiaappears in Two Men

Alsatia is the name of a woman the narrator flirts with at a dance at the beginning of "Two Men," while Caplan is the name of the man with whom she is involved. Caplan never actually appears in the story, but given the narrator's determination to steer clear of him, there is the sense that Caplan can be violent, dangerous, and unreasonable.

Jack Hotelappears in Out on Bail

Hotel appears in two stories, as a principal character in "Out on Bail" and as a minor character in "Dundun." He is portrayed as young, somewhat vulnerable and naïve, as somewhat lacking in willpower, and as a result being rather passive. There is the sense, in both Hotel's appearances, that life is something that happens to Hotel, instead of something that he goes out and lives on his terms.

Dundunappears in Dundun

Of all the narrator's friends and acquaintances that appear in the pages of this collection, Dundun is perhaps the most violent, the most emotionally cold, and perhaps even the most psychotic. He is portrayed, in the story of which he is the title character, as impulsive, violent, and self-preservational. He, like many of the secondary characters in the collection, can be seen as a manifestation/externalization of the darker side of the narrator - in this case, his self-interest and his capacity for destroying others.

McInnesappears in Dundun

McInnes is Dundun's victim in "Dundun", shot by him for reasons that aren't ever entirely made clear. There is the sense that their confrontation was triggered by a drug deal gone wrong, but again the narrative never clearly explains. McInnes is essentially stoic and calm, which may in fact be resignation to his fate and circumstance. In that sense he is clearly a contrast to the more volatile, more apparently desperate Dundun.

Wayneappears in Work

Wayne is perhaps the closest that the narrator comes to a real friend. Yes, the two men are united by drug use and/or alcoholism, and by a need for money to fuel their habits. Somehow, however, the narrative conveys the sense that their camaraderie goes beyond their shared addiction, and desperation to do what it takes to feed that addiction. The narrator himself suggests that this is the case when he refers to his feeling that he is sharing Wayne's dream about his wife.

The Bartender at the Vineappears in Work

The female bartender at The Vine is perceived and portrayed by the narrator as a much needed manifestation of grace, compassion, and unconditional generosity in a world that, to him, seems to have not much of any of them. It is perhaps ironic that these positive qualities manifest, according to the narrator, in her willingness to pour generously from the bottles of alcohol at her disposal. Ironic or not, her generosity (and the gratitude and affection with which the narrator receives them) are welcome notes of compassion in an otherwise very bleak portrayal of humanity.

Georgieappears in Emergency

Georgie, like Richard, Tom, and Jack Hotel (but unlike Wayne) is portrayed as a friend born of circumstance and convenience, rather than of any apparent, genuine connection or bond. In other words, the only thing Georgie and the narrator have in common is drug addiction, which Georgie is evidently all too willing and able to indulge. The most interesting thing about Georgie is the comment he makes about himself at the story's conclusion, the suggestion that "he saves lives." It's important to note that the narrator makes no comment on the way Georgie says this - seriously, ironically, jokingly, a combination of all the above. In other words, the reader doesn't know whether to take Georgie seriously - whether he truly does see himself in this light, or whether he has a more ironic self image that lets him see his position and/or lifestyle for what it really is.

Michelle, John Smithappears in Dirty Wedding

Of all the women the narrator portrays himself as being involved with (and there are several), Michelle is the only one actually given a name. There is no explicitly apparent reason for this, but the narrative and thematic content of the story suggests that she has a name because she is more important and/or memorable to the narrator than the others, perhaps because of her having had an abortion - perhaps, more specifically, because the narrator treated her callously afterward. In other words, she is perhaps given a name because the narrator feels particularly guilty about how he treated her, as opposed to the nameless women he becomes involved with and rejected about whom he seems to have little or no regrets. John Smith is the man Michelle eventually becomes involved with after her relationship with the narrator comes to an end. Both John and Michelle end up dead, both apparently of drug overdoses. They can perhaps be perceived as representing and/or externalizing the narrator's potential for self-destruction, accidental (as in John's case) or deliberate (as in Michelle's).

The Train Passengersappears in Dirty Wedding

The two train passengers encountered by the narrator on his wanderings as described in "Dirty Wedding" both remain nameless, and both introduce the narrator to new sides of himself. The male passenger, or more specifically his semi-nudity, triggers in the

narrator a previously un-hinted at, perhaps one time only, attraction to his own gender. The female passenger introduces him to the possibility, as he himself suggests, "that wherever you look, all you see is yourself." In other words, she awakens the narrator to the concept of self-awareness, a kind of spiritual seed planting that ultimately seems to have grown into the kind of self-perception that has resulted in his being able to tell his stories.

The Polish Manappears in The Other Man

At the beginning of "The Other Man," the narrator suggests that the man portrayed in this story is the second man referred to in "Two Men." The man in that story is named Thatcher and is portrayed as having sold the narrator some bad drugs. The man in this story is unnamed, and while there is no mention of any kind of drug deal, there is the sense that he is duplicitous and manipulative, a portrayal that at least implies that he could be a drug dealer, and the sort that would sell bad drugs as good.

The Woman in the Barappears in The Other Man

The unnamed woman in the bar is another of the women with whom the narrator becomes involved and apparently uses for (mutual) sexual pleasure. While it's never actually discussed, there is the sense that this woman, again like the others, is dismissed and/or discarded as soon as the pleasure is over. The apparent difference between this and the other women is that this woman comes across as being just as duplicitous as the other man. The fact that the narrator embraces that duplicity in order to realize pleasure is a stark contrast to his eventual rejection of the second man's duplicity (in "Two Men") which he had initially accepted (also in the name of receiving pleasure, albeit from drugs rather than sex).

Angeliqueappears in Happy Hour

Unlike Michelle, the only other named woman in this collection, the narrator never has sex with Angelique - he only wants to. There is the sense that she, young and beautiful though she may be, is in fact a distraction - like the bus rides and the trip to the library, she is little more than a distraction, something to keep the narrator occupied while he's waiting for his chance for cheaper booze during happy hour.

Steady Hands at Seattle Generalappears in Bill

This character literally has holes in his head - in his cheeks, to be specific, the result of a gun-violent encounter with a woman. There is the sense that he, as brief a participant in the narrator's life (and in the stories about that life) as he is, that he has defined himself and his perspective on the world by these holes. In other words, he is a victim. "Talk to the hole," he says at the end of the story. In this perspective he, like many of the

other characters encountered by the narrator, can be seen as an externalization of a characteristic of the narrator - in this case, his sense of victim-hood.

The Mennonite Coupleappears in Beverly Home

The narrator's voyeuristic involvement with this young, conservative married couple begins with his accidental observation of the wife after a shower, continues with the development of his obsession with watching the husband and wife have sex, and ends with his discovery not only of their capacity for fantasy-destroying argument, but also for kindness, forgiveness and transcendence. There is the sense that his encounter with the couple's love and compassion (and spirituality?) plays an important role in his process of healing from his addiction and the damage it has caused both him and others.

The Narrator's Loversappears in Beverly Home

In "Beverly Home," the narrator portrays himself as sexually involved with not one but two women, both of whom have some kind of physical disability that, on some level, echoes and mirrors his own emotional and spiritual disability. In other words, they are cripples together, finding mutual support, renewal and healing as they see past the disabilities and into need and vulnerability. The irony, of course, that in the case of the first woman in particular, the narrator's openness to build a broader relationship on that new kind of seeing is both restricted and restricting - in other words, he wants sex, not feeling. There is the sense that through his involvement (?) with the Mennonite couple, as well as with the people he takes care of at the home, his involvement with the second woman has at least the beginnings of a deeper sense of feeling and spirituality - in other words, that he is even further along the way towards healing and wholeness.

Objects/Places

The Book's Title

According to a brief forward, the book's title "Jesus' Son" is a quote from a song by 1960s songwriter Lou Reed, in which he refers to drugs making him feel like "Jesus' Son". The question, of course, is How does Jesus' son feel? Close to God? Miraculously powerful? Like a great leader, teacher or prophet? Like a theological rebel? All are possible, and all have potential connections, some more tenuous than others, to the stories in the collection.

Drugs and Alcoholappears in All Stories

Hard drugs of various kinds (hashish, opium, heroin, illegally obtained pharmaceuticals) and alcohol (mostly beer and cheap wine) play defining roles in the action of several of the stories in this collection, particularly "Out on Bail," "Dundun" and "Emergency." While several of the other stories refer to drug/alcohol use practically in passing ("Car Crash While Hitchhiking," "Work," "Two Men"), and others not at all, there is the very strong sense that the perceptions, attitudes and actions of the narrator are all colored by intense, addictive substance abuse. Only in "Beverly Hotel" is there the sense that the story being told is colored less by actual substance abuse than by recovery from that abuse.

Iowaappears in Several Stories

This mid-west state, renowned for its flatness and its agricultural and rural sensibilities, is the setting for several of the stories, its stark landscape providing an evocative backdrop for the equally stark narratives of human desperation set against it.

Seattleappears in Several Stories

This city on the north west coast of the United States (in the state of Washington) has an altogether different atmosphere than Iowa. Generally wet where Iowa is generally dry and generally more naturally lush where Iowa is generally barren, Seattle is also a city, whereas the stories set in Iowa seem to take place in a more rural setting. For further consideration of the relative values of the two settings, see "Style - Setting."

The Vineappears in Several Stories

The Vine, a lower/working class bar, is the setting for important encounters in several stories, particularly the narrator's meetings with Jack Hotel in "Out on Bail" and his friend Wayne in "Work." The Vine is portrayed as a kind of haven, a safe place where

people troubled by their relationships with drugs, alcohol, crime or other people can take refuge. "Work" contains a description of not only its welcoming atmosphere but a particularly welcoming individual - a friendly bartender, whose generosity comes across as an oasis of compassion, albeit of an unusual sort, in the stark, Iowa-like aridity of the addict's life.

The Narrator's Carappears in Two Men and Dundun

Comments in "Two Men" and "Dundun" refer to the narrator's car in the same terms - as having broken regular brakes, but a working emergency brake. The first point to note here is that the references reinforce the idea that the narrator in both stories is the same individual. For consideration of the second point, see "Topics for Discussion - What is the symbolic value ..."

The Vehiclesappears in Car Crash While Hitchhiking

There are three important vehicles in "Car Crash ..." The first is the vehicle in which the narrator is riding, the second is the vehicle hit by the first vehicle (in which a man is fatally injured), and the third is the truck driven by a driver who doesn't want to get involved. All three represent the unpredictable dangers associated with human existence - destruction, death, and the ambivalence of others whose compassion has, for whatever reason, is inaccessible to them.

The Narrator's Gunappears in Two Men

"Two Men" is the only story in which the narrator carries a gun, a symbol of his turning his destructive attitudes and behavior outwards instead of inwards. In other words, the gun represents his desire/determination to destroy someone else, as opposed to his weapons of choice for destroying himself - drugs and alcohol.

The Empty Houseappears in Work

On one level, the empty house represents simply a source of income for the desperate narrator and his friend Wayne. On another level, it symbolically represents the emptiness of their lives from which they somehow manage to draw the (desire? will? means?) to exist another day. On a third level, because a window in the house offers a glimpse of soaring beauty, and because of its very existence, the house can also be seen as a symbol of hope and possibility - perhaps the source of the previously discussed (desire? will? means?) to exist. Because the house has been essentially ruined, the image becomes one of ruined, degraded hope, that nevertheless somehow manages to continue to exist. Finally, the narrator's comment that he felt as though he was sharing Wayne's hallucination about his wife suggests that he (the narrator) feels as though the hope and possibility represented by the house and the vision seen from its window is itself a kind of illusion, a falseness, an emptiness.

Terrence's Knifeappears in Emergency

The knife is an ambivalent symbol and/or metaphor in "Emergency." On the first, and perhaps most obvious, level of meaning, it represents violence - that done to Terrence, that done to the body of the pregnant jackrabbit. On another level, it represents the passing danger associated with that violence (the injury done to Terrence is neither serious nor permanent) and, ironically enough, the potential for life associated with violence (the violence done to the jackrabbit by the knife preserves the lives, at least initially, of her babies).

The Baby Rabbitsappears in Emergency

The baby rabbits, rescued from the womb of their accidentally killed mother, represent the strange, desperate, searching hope for new life that occasionally surges in the lives and souls of the narrator and his friends. Their deaths, meanwhile, resulting from the narrator's thoughtlessness, represent the way that hope so often dies in the face of the preoccupations that the narrator and other characters allow themselves to get sucked into.

The Trainappears in Dirty Wedding

The train so enjoyed by the narrator in this story is representative of both his life and the stories he's writing about that life. Carried away by racing drug addiction, he glimpses life as he passes it by, noting its details but not really connecting to them, or to the people living them.

The Ferryappears in The Other Man

The action of the first part of "The Other Man" takes place on a west coast ferry, a setting that metaphorically reinforces the unstable, transitory relationship not only between the narrator and his fellow passenger, but perhaps even between the narrator and his other friends/allies throughout the narrative.

The Kelly Barappears in The Other Man

The action of the second part of "The Other Man" is set in a bar that is less welcoming than The Vine (referred to above) but provides the same sort of unconditional refuge, manifest in this case in the unnamed woman who matches the narrator in their mutual, desperate need for sexual connection/comfort.

The Horse Pillappears in Happy Hour

Like the reward at the end of a mythical quest (The Holy Grail, The Sword in the Stone, the Golden Fleece, the beautiful maiden), the large, hallucinogenic pill received by the narrator is his prize for being patient, for enduring all the distractions of his day (his life?), a longed-for gift of long-sought oblivion.

Beverly Homeappears in Beverly Home

This is essentially a nursing home with elements of a psychiatric institution, a place where those with terminal mental/physical/emotional disabilities make their home. For further consideration of the metaphoric value of the home, see "Topics for Discussion - In what ways ..."

The House of the Mennonite Coupleappears in Beverly Home

The house inhabited by a young couple living what seems to be an austere, respectful, occasionally emotionally intense life (intense of both anger and devotion) can be seen as representing the narrator's goal of living such a life himself, free from addiction and its associated complications and/or destruction. This idea is reinforced by the narrator's relationship with the house - furtive (like his addiction-subdued desires for emotional and physical health), outside looking in (like his life, in which he looks at health from a perspective of struggling with addiction), and close but out of reach (like the face/feelings of the woman as seen through the window).

Themes

Addiction and its Influence

There is the strong sense that almost all the characters in the stories in this collection, if not all, are caught in the self-destructive trap of addiction to drugs and/or alcohol. The actions, reactions and apparent feelings of the narrator and the people he encounters on his journey towards compassion and health (a journey concluded in "Beverly Hotel" - see "Desperation and Compassion" below) all seem connected, albeit to varying degrees, to their drive to escape reality through intoxicating substances. In other words, they have become addicted to their avoidance of reality, lost in darkness and fear that is, in fact, even darker and more destructive than they life they are so desperate to escape. Their addictions drive them to extreme actions and reactions - physical violence, emotional violence, stealing, lying, sexual promiscuity - all of which could, in fact, be seen as extreme versions of behavior practiced by any/every human being faced with loneliness, self-hatred, and a feeling of being lost.

This theme also manifests on a technical level, not just in what the stories are but in the way they're told. There is the sense that the almost stream-of-consciousness narrative style, in the seemingly random juxtapositions of words, images, and events, the author is communicating what it's like to experience life from within a haze of drugs and alcohol addiction. Emotions are heightened, sensual experiences are intensified, the sense of time is distorted, the meaning of incidents and the relationships between them become clear (if occasionally illusory) - all these are associated with drug use, and all are manifest in the style in which the author writes his stories. For further consideration of this aspect of the book, see "Style - Point of View" and "Language and Meaning."

The Need for, and Value of, Human Contact

The narrator and many of the friends/acquaintances/lovers appearing in the various stories share a common, unspoken desire - to connect, openly and unconditionally, with other people, to share existence, to navigate its dangers and safeties in the relative comfort of another lonely human being. Most, if not all, are in one way or another isolated within their lives, by addiction, by physical disability, by some unknown circumstance. As a result, they continually strive for some kind of meaningful contact with another human being.

Perhaps the most telling, and unifying, expressions of this theme can be found in "Beverly Hotel." At one point, the narrator reveals that one of his part-time duties is to go through the halls and simply touch the patients/inmates, many (most?) of whom have been abandoned (deliberately or as the result of an isolating disease like Alzheimer's) by families, friends, lovers, spouses ... anyone who might regularly, and affectionately, touch them. This need for human contact, manifest in the desire to touch and be touched, has clear echoes in the narrator's description, also in "Beverly Hotel," of his

two lovers, whose company he enjoys simply and only because they provide sexual intimacy - i.e., the intimacy of touch, the intimacy of skin-to-skin contact with another human being.

Back-tracing this image and idea through the rest of the narratives in the book, then, the reader can clearly see that one of the driving forces of all the characters, unexpressed or unconscious or not, is the need to reach out and connect with another human being. Sometimes characters, including the narrator, express this need more overtly than others (the military woman in "The Other Man", the narrator and his two lovers in "Beverly Hotel"). Sometimes it's expressed subtly (Wayne in "Work," Georgie in "Emergency"), but upon deeper consideration of those stories and their circumstances, the actions taken by the narrator and his friends can be seen as springing from a simple, addiction-driven desire to not be alone. On occasion, the need for, and value of, human contact is expressed less in terms of people than in terms of a place where such connections can be made. This is true of The Vine (in several of the stories), the Beverly Hotel and the house of the Mennonite couple (in "Beverly Hotel"), and the train in "Dirty Wedding."

Desperation vs. Compassion

Motivating and defining the need for human contact, in the narrator and in several of the individuals he encounters and/or writes about, is a deeply seated sense of desperation, a sense of a large, gaping (loneliness? hopelessness? self-loathing?) at the central, perhaps even subconscious, core of their experience. They are each, in their own ways, desperate to fill that emptiness, even at the expense of their physical and spiritual lives - with drugs and/or alcohol, with anonymous sexual contact, with the rush that comes with emotional and spiritual violence, with spontaneous adventure and/or excitement, etc. On occasion, however, the narrator refers to an aspect of existence that seems to him, at least for a while, to answer that desperation with a kind of peace. This is compassion, of the sort (he believes) to be evident in the generosity of the nameless bartender at The Vine, of the (admittedly misguided) Georgie towards the unborn offspring of the accidentally killed jackrabbit, and of his friends in "Out on Bail," who strive to ensure he remains alive after an overdose.

These acts of compassion are, for the most part, only glimpsed, tantalizing spasms of brief but sustaining human connection, treasured and sought but generally overwhelmed by the more dominant and the more pervasive despair-driven self-destruction of drug and alcohol addiction. "Beverly Hotel," however, is all about compassion - the formalized compassion of touch mandated in the narrator's job description, the compassion-with-boundaries of the narrator's sex-only relationships with his two lovers, the apparently unconditional compassion of the remorseful Mennonite husband towards his upset wife. It's important to note the additional layers of context in which these manifestations of compassion appear - specifically, the narrator's admission that he is in the determined process of healing from his addiction, and perhaps most tellingly, the fact that the story is at the end of the collection. This last point suggests that on some level, the author is suggesting that compassion, in whatever form an

individual receives it and/or offers it, is both the goal and the result of a searching, humanity-defined life.

Style

Point of View

Each of the stories is recounted in the first person, past tense point of view - in other words, as though the narrator had the experiences he's describing and, in a turn of phrase that seems particularly relevant to this collection, has lived to tell the tale(s). This, as suggested at a couple of points in the collection, is a particularly important aspect of his experience - he has survived. This is perhaps a reason why the narrator (author?) feels that it's important for these stories to be told - as a cautionary tale about the dangers of drug use/addiction, and the alternatively positive side of the coin, of compassion and connection as a means of surviving not only addiction, but life in general. For further consideration of this particular aspect of the collection, see the analysis for Stories 3 ("Out on Bail") and 11 ("Beverly Home").

A particularly important aspect of point of view is the way it has been / is affected by the narrator's apparent drug use and addiction (see "Themes - Addiction and its Influence"). Portrayals of character, relationship and incident are all filtered through the narrator's addiction-influenced perspective, and must be considered by the reader in those terms. In other words, everything in each of these stories, even the portrayals of healing in "Beverly Hotel," relate to, and are colored by, varying degrees of hallucination, desperation, and need. This aspect of the collection's point of view is reflected in choice of word and image, and in the way words and images are put together in a style that itself seems somewhat hallucinogenic (see "Style," below).

Setting

There are several important aspects to the story's setting, some more general, others more specific. In terms of the former, there is only one indication of when in time the collection is set - the fact that the narrator/author clearly states that the action of "Emergency" takes place in 1973. Given that there seems to be a clear connection between the various stories (that they are all "snapshots" of the same person's life "taken" at roughly the same period of that life), it would seem reasonable for the reader to conclude that they all take place at roughly this time. Briefly, the early-1970s in America, where these stories all apparently take place, was a time of increased experimentation with an increasing variety of drugs, a time that began in the 1960's with the so-called "hippie" sub culture and continued for several years. By (apparently) setting the collection in this period, the author is suggesting that the narrator is part of a more widespread experience - in other words, that it's not just him.

The second layer of value to the collection's setting has to do with the regions in which the stories take place. Many of the stories take place either in Iowa or Seattle, with essentially being portrayed as a much less safe place for an outsider like the narrator

and his friends than the more diverse (sophisticated?) community of Seattle. For further consideration of the value of both locations, see "Objects/Places."

The third layer of value and/or meaning has to do with the specific settings of events in each of the stories, places like The Vine (in several of the stories), the Beverly Home (in "Beverly Home") and the ferry (in "The Other Man"). For consideration of the metaphorical value of each of these settings, see "Objects/Places."

Language and Meaning

As discussed above in "Point of View," and also in "Themes - Addiction and its Influence", the language used throughout this collection (and the way that language is put together) is significantly influenced by the narrator's drug use and addiction. There is a certain sense of fragmentation, of an almost indiscriminate frankness, and of sometimes disconcerting randomness not only about the way incidents within each narrative are put together, but also about the way the stories are placed within the collection. The point is not made to suggest that either the stories or the collection itself is incoherent or incomprehensible. On the contrary - within several of the individual narratives, there are very clear, powerfully made points, and there are equally clear and unifying themes that can be perceived in the collection as a whole, specifically in the way the stories are juxtaposed one with the other. The point about the collection's drug-influenced narrative style is made to suggest that the author brings the very subjective experience of his narrator home to the reader in an immediate, often visceral way that takes the reader safely into the addict's arena of perception. In other words, language use in "Jesus' Son" takes the reader into the sometimes patchy, sometimes frightening, often fascinating experience of someone whose version and/or perceptions of reality are skewed, and therefore illuminating.

Structure

For the most part, both the collection and the stories within that collection initially come across as lacking in any kind of traditional, linear structure. As discussed in the analysis for Stories 10 and 11 ("Steady Hands ..." and "Beverly Hotel"), there is a sense that by this point in the collection, and indeed his life, the narrator has reached a place of achievement in his journey towards health and freedom from addiction - a place that in a traditionally structured work might be described as climactic.

The point must be made, however, that there is little or no sense of overall narrative structure threading through the preceding narratives to create a sense of steady advancement - there are no clearly defined steps along the aforementioned journey, no so-called "plot" sending the narrative inevitably from one event to another. Instead, the overall effect of the collection, and of the individual stories within that collection, is cumulative. Experiences, narrations and feelings build on one another to make their point, rather than connect one after another, as they would in traditionally structured narratives. This is perhaps another manifestation of both a particular aspect of point of

view and of a particular theme - specifically, the narrator's drug use. The mind and perceptions of an addict are generally more cumulative than non-linear, with what insights that do emerge from a drug-induced experience manifesting more as flashes of insight rather than the product of a logical, structured deduction. In other words, in both the individual stories and the collection as a whole, "Jesus' Son" provides a good example of how theme, structure, point of view and narrative voice call can, and perhaps should, intertwine to mutual, illuminating benefit.

Quotes

"I knew every raindrop by its name. I sensed everything before it happened. I knew a certain Oldsmobile would stop for me even before it slowed, and by the sweet voices of the family inside it I knew we'd have an accident in the storm. I didn't care. They said they'd take me all the way." Car Crash While Hitchhiking,p. 3.

"His blood bubbled out of his mouth with every breath. He wouldn't be taking many more, I knew that, but he didn't, and therefore I looked down into the great pity of a person's life on this earth. I don't mean that we all end up dead, that's not the great pity. I mean that he couldn't tell me what he was dreaming, and I couldn't tell him what was real." Ibid, p. 8

"She shrieked as I imagined an eagle would shriek. It felt wonderful t o be alive to hear it! I've gone looking for that feeling everywhere." Ibid, p. 9.

"...we'd torn open our chests and shown our cowardly hearts, and you can never stay friends after something like that." Two Men, p. 13

"My wife was different than she used to be, and we had a six month old baby I was afraid of, a little son." Ibid, p.19

"The Vine was different every day. Some of the most terrible things that had happened to me in my life had happened in here. But like the others I kept coming back ... every time I entered the place there were veiled faces promising everything and then clarifying quickly into the dull, the usual, looking up at me and making the same mistake." Out on Bail, p. 30

"There were many moments in the Vine ... where you might think today was yesterday, and yesterday was tomorrow, and so on. Because we all believed we were tragic, and we drank. We had that helpless, destined feeling. We would die with handcuffs on. We would be put a stop to, and it wouldn't be our fault. So we imagined. And yet we were always being found innocent for ridiculous reasons." Ibid, p. 32

"There was no touching the hem of mystery, no little occasion when any of us thought ... that our lungs were filled with light, or anything like that ... I was certain I was here in this world because I couldn't tolerate any other place." Ibid, p. 34.

"I wanted to be the one who saw it through and got McInnes to the doctor without a wreck. People would talk about it, and I hoped I would be liked." Dundun, p. 39

"Will you believe me when I tell you there was kindness in his heart? His left hand didn't know what his right hand was doing. It was only that certain important connections had been burned through. If I opened up your head and ran a hot soldering iron around in your brain, I might turn you into someone like that." Ibid, p. 42

"What word can be uttered about those fields? She stood in the middle of them as on a high mountain, with her red hair pulled out sideways by the wind, around her the green and grey plains pressed down flat, and all the grasses of Iowa whistling one note. I knew who she was." Work, pp. 50

"All the really good times happened when Wayne was around. But this afternoon, somehow, was the best of all those times. We had money. We were grimy and tired. Usually we felt guilty and frightened, because there was something wrong with us, and we didn't know what it was; but today we had the feeling of men who had worked." Ibid, p. 53

"For a while he day was clear and peaceful. It was one of the moments you stay in, to hell with all the troubles of before and after." Emergency, p. 63

"On the farther side of the field, just beyond the curtains of snow, the sky was torn away and the angels were descending out of a brilliant blue summer, their huge faces streaked with light and full of pity. The sight of them cut through my heart and down the knuckles of my spine, and if there'd been anything in my bowels I would have messed my pants from fear." Ibid, p. 67

"Through the neighborhoods and past the platforms, I felt the canceled life dreaming after me. Yes, a ghost. A vestige. Something remaining." Dirty Wedding, p. 78

"Think of being curled up and floating in a darkness. Even if you could think, even if you had an imagination, would you ever imagine its opposite, this miraculous world the Asian Taoists call the 'Ten Thousand Things'? And if the darkness just got darker? And then you were dead? What would you care? How would you even know the difference?" Ibid, p. 81

"It wasn't my life she was after ... she wanted to eat my heart and be lost in the desert with what she'd done, she wanted to fall on her knees and give birth from it, she wanted to hurt me as only a child can be hurt by its mother." Ibid, p. 84

"A certain yearning attached itself between us. I wanted to participate in what was happening to him. It was just a careless, instinctive thing. There was nothing of his I wanted in particular. I wanted it all." The Other Man, p. 88

"I could almost trace theirs steps back to the rooms from which they'd wandered tonight with everything they stood for disrupted by their maladies." Ibid,p. 91

"It was there. It was. The long walk down the hall. The door opening. The beautiful stranger. The torn moon mended. Our fingers touching away the tears. It was there." Ibid, p. 93

"[Angelique] seemed to be thinking about something far away, waiting patiently for somebody to destroy her ... there was a part of her she hadn't yet allowed to be born because it was too beautiful for this place ... but she was mostly a torn-up trollop." Happy Hour, p. 100

" 'I been shot twice ... once by each wife, for a total of three bullets, making four hoes, three ins and one out.' " Steady Hands at Seattle General, Bill, p. 108

" 'Talk into my bullet hole. Tell me I'm fine." Ibid, p. 111

"And sometimes a dust storm would stand off in the desert, towering so high it was like another city - a terrifying new era approaching, blurring our dreams." Beverly Home, p. 115

"I looked for work because people seemed to believe I should look for work, and when I found a job I believed I was happy about it because these same people - counselors and Narcotics Anonymous members and such - seemed to think a job was a happy think." Ibid, p. 116

"...I was afraid to make love to her without the conversations and laughter from that false universe playing in our ears, because I didn't want to get to know her very well, and didn't want, to be bridging any distances with our eyes." Ibid, p. 122

"...I felt about the circular hallway of Beverly Home as about the place where, between our lives on this earth, we go back to mingle with other souls waiting to be born." Ibid, p. 126

Topics for Discussion

Consider each story in turn, and discuss how each of the book's three themes (the influence of drugs and addiction, the need for and value of human contact, and the tension between desperation and compassion) is explored, in either positive or negative terms.

What is your interpretation of the outwardly directed violence exhibited by the narrator in "Two Men?" What motivates it? What are the circumstances of that particular story that lead him to display violence in that situation only?

What is the symbolic value of the broken brakes on the narrator's car (as referred to in "Two Men" and "Dundun")? What actions and/or circumstances and/or attitudes not only in those two stories but in the collection as a whole are represented?

There seems to be a connection between the endings of "Out on Bail" and "Emergency" - specifically, between the narrator's reference in the former to being alive while Jack Hotel is dead, and Georgie's comment at the conclusion of the latter that he "saves lives." What do you think that connection might be, and how do you think it might relate to any/all of the book's three central themes?

In what ways is the narrator as much a patient of the Beverly Home as he is an employee? In what ways is he as disabled as its patients/inmates? In what ways is he taken care of and/or healed in the same way as they are?

What relationships might the title of "Dirty Wedding" refer to? Why is the wedding "dirty?"

Consider the narrator's comment in "Dirty Wedding" that "wherever you look, all you see is yourself." Do you agree or disagree with this comment? Why or why not? In what ways is this comment reflected in the other stories in this collection?

Consider the narrator's comments about abortion at the end of "Dirty Wedding." Do you agree with those comments? Why or why not?

What are the different layers of meaning associated with the word "home" in "Beverly Home?" In what ways has the narrator found "home?" In what ways is he still searching for "home?" What is your experience of / feeling about the word and the concept of "home?"