

Junky Study Guide

Junky by William S. Burroughs

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Plot Summary

William Lee—nicknamed Bill—is a thirty-year-old white male living in New York City who begins using morphine and develops an addiction to narcotics—or junk. Over the next five years or so he uses drugs, engages in petty crimes and drug peddling, and moves to Texas, New Orleans, and finally Mexico City all the while intermittently kicking his junk habit.

The novel begins around 1945 when Bill takes his first shot of morphine. Over the next year he continues to use junk in various forms and develops a strong dependency. He moves through the shady neighborhoods of New York City engaged in petty crime, drug peddling, and constant habitual injection of morphine. He is accompanied by his wife and children though they are hardly mentioned in the text. Bill's circle of shady associates grows as his legitimate interests diminish. He is finally embroiled in a circle of police informers and illegal drug use and flees impending legal trouble, stopping only to receive a medical cure.

Bill travels to Texas and settles briefly in the Brownsville area, remaining clean for several months. Apparently bored, he then moves to New Orleans and engages in the activities of that city including casual homosexual sex. After several months he resumes using drugs and quickly develops a habit. Bill then engages in the predictable cycle of petty crime, drug peddling, and habitual drug injection. New Orleans becomes the focus of a major anti-drug law enforcement action and Bill is eventually arrested. Upon his release from jail, and while his trial is pending, he returns to Texas where he moderates his drug use.

As Bill's trial approaches it becomes likely that he will serve a lengthy prison sentence. Bill refuses to allow that to happen and flees to Mexico City. In Mexico Bill remains largely drug-free for about a year, instead spending his days reading newspapers in cafés and soliciting homosexual encounters with prostitutes or various willing partners. Eventually Bill meets other junkies and once again becomes addicted. After about a year of using junk Bill decides it is time to quit again. Following several failed attempts, Bill turns to heavy drinking and Benzedrine to kick junk during a period lasting several months; his health suffers a precipitous decline and his behavior becomes erratic. Over the next several months, however, he recovers and remains drug-free. He is joined by several associates from New York City, his wife leaves him, and he focuses his attention on a new drug from South America which promises to stimulate latent telepathic powers. The novel concludes with Bill traveling south in search of the new drug.



Prologue

Prologue Summary

William Lee—Bill—is a thirty-year-old white male living in New York City who begins to use morphine and develops an addiction to narcotics—also referred to as junk. Over the next five years he uses drugs, engages in petty crimes and drug peddling, and moves to Texas, New Orleans, and finally Mexico City while intermittently kicking his junk habit.

Bill, the narrator and protagonist of the novel, relates his early life history. Born 1914 to an established, wealthy family, he grew up in a typical familial situation but was plagued by various nervous conditions such as nightmares and hallucinations. His athletic performance was mediocre and his academic performance was average or slightly above. He attended a typical suburban high school but gravitated toward an interest in criminal behavior. Lee was a loner and a petty vandal but graduated and proceeded to an Ivy League university where he studied English with moderate success, graduating with honors. While at university he met a clique of homosexual artists but was largely put off by their posturing. After graduating he began to receive a lifelong monthly stipend sufficient for reasonable needs. He traveled through Europe where he apparently engaged in securing the casual services of female and male prostitutes. He returned to the United States and drifted through a variety of interests and odd jobs while pursuing psychoanalysis. He was drafted into the army during World War II. Hating army routine he arranged to be discharged for mental health issues, citing the fact that he had cut off his own finger in the past and that he exhibited homosexual tendencies. After being discharged he wandered through several odd jobs and gradually became addicted to heroin. Suddenly, his monthly stipend was insufficient for his needs and he began in earnest to turn to a life of petty crime.

Prologue Analysis

The prologue is a curious introduction to the text and reads like an autobiographical sketch. Even the concluding segments dealing with the process of heroin addiction are presented as nonfiction commentary. Significantly, Lee comes from an educated and wealthy background, enjoys a large monthly stipend, but seems to have no direction in life and somewhat antisocial. At about the age of 30 he begins dabbling in heroin use which gradually develops into a mild habit. After going through withdrawals Lee is clean for an indeterminate period of time but then returns to heroin use. Lee clearly establishes himself, then, as a fairly shiftless man without ambition. This discussion of use, addiction, dependency, and withdrawal is non-chronological in that the opening text of the novel's next segment begins the story of Lee's casual use at the age of about 30. Many critics view the prologue—indeed the entire novel—as thinly fictionalized autobiography. However, modern textual investigation indicates that the text is probably more fictional than previously thought.



Pages 1-10

Pages 1-10 Summary

During 1944 William Lee lives in a dingy apartment and has an acquaintance named Norton who is always selling stolen goods. One day Norton gives Lee a Thompson submachine gun and several boxes of morphine syrettes on the understanding that Lee will sell them for whatever he can get. Lee speaks to another associate named Jack, a sharp operator who confidently and successfully pulls many minor scams. Jack takes Lee to an apartment and introduces him to Herman, Joey, and Roy. Herman is not interested in Lee's wares, but Roy makes a low-ball offer on most of the morphine and arranges to pick it up in a few days. They all sit around the apartment and drink while Jack spins unlikely stories of a petty criminal nature. Herman glowers at Lee, disliking him instantly.

A few days later, Lee decides to use one of the morphine syrettes. His experience is pleasant, physically, but makes him feel somewhat paranoid. Later, Roy arrives and warns Lee to avoid junk if at all possible. He then buys most of Lee's morphine and tells him that he will continue to buy as much morphine as Lee can provide. During the next month, Norton gives Lee more morphine and Lee peddles it to Roy—and uses some from time to time. Soon, Roy and Lee are spending time together drinking and cruising shady doctors' offices attempting to get prescriptions for painkillers. Lee's new and constant presence wears through Herman's initial hostility. One night Lee, Roy, Herman, and some others are drinking at a bar. Herman's unstable friend Whitey gets drunk, becomes emotionally overwrought, and ends up stabbing Subway Slim in the back for no apparent reason. Whitey flees the bar, and Lee and Roy quickly leave the area while Subway Slim staggers away to get medical attention—fortunately his wound is not serious.

Pages 1-10 Analysis

The novel introduces the topic of junk use as casually as Bill takes his first injection. After being warned away from morphine by an inveterate morphine user, Bill uses the drug and finds it uncomfortable and disorienting. However, he repeats the use on an occasional basis and finds subsequent uses more pleasant. Bill's involvement with junkies and petty criminals comes about because he acts as an informal fence for stolen goods. His rationale or need for doing so is not apparent; it is not financial. The ultimate disposition of the submachine gun is not considered.

The various events described establish the realistic, frank, and dark tone of the novel. Drug use and crime are prevalent—a way of life. Violence of a minor sort is commonplace, serious violence not unknown, and most of the characters live atypical and amoral lives in squalor. The sparse writing style is continued throughout the remainder of the novel, which is remarkably even in tone and texture throughout. The



initial segment encapsulates the remainder of the novel; the plot revolves around drug use and the primary focus of the narrator and nearly every other character is how to obtain illegal drugs to support an addictive habit.



Pages 11-19

Pages 11-19 Summary

Bill stops by Jack's apartment but Jack is out; instead, Bill meets Mary, a tall red-haired girl. Mary invites Bill into the apartment and they engage in small talk about various objects that Jack has collected. Mary explains that she has a rare disease that causes her bones to slowly dissolve. Bill imagines her as a protoplasmic boneless mass, undulating about. Some younger kids stop by and then Mary and Bill decide to use drugs and they travel about the city in a taxicab looking for dealers. They finally buy some Benzedrine and get high, sitting in the apartment talking. Mary tells Bill a great deal about how to be a successful female prostitute and then becomes angry at her personal plight.

A few days later, Herman and Bill form an informal partnership, buy a kilogram of marijuana, and start to peddle the drug. They store the bulk of the drug in various locations. Bill expounds on the difficulties of making money selling marijuana—users are not dedicated, users are likely to talk to the police and give up their dealer, users want to talk for a long time after making a purchase, and the increments of drug sales are relatively small. Thus, dealing marijuana is a high risk and low payoff proposition. Bill then expostulates on the action of marijuana, noting that it does not harm the general health of the user and in some cases actually improves it. Marijuana does not lead users into crime but does provide an aphrodisiac effect. Marijuana does not make users crazy or dangerous, but does make them unfit to operate a motor vehicle.

Eventually Bill begins to use junk every day. Jack is arrested and sent to prison while Mary moves to Florida with a man, and Roy locates a doctor who is willing to write many prescriptions and drifts around in obscurity. Herman moves in with Bill, mooching apartment space. Bill then goes into a lengthy consideration of types of doctors and how most can be approached with some story or another to obtain a prescription for morphine. Roy, Bill, and Herman all spend time injecting morphine, buying morphine, and hiding morphine from each other. Bill begins to use morphine several times a day. While using junk, junkies cannot become drunk and hate to bathe. As Bill's habit forms his life focuses on the single aspect of obtaining and using junk. Soon, each day is consumed with elaborate plans and speculations, interspersed with injections.

Pages 11-19 Analysis

The character of Mary is interesting but not significant in the larger framework of the novel. She appears here in some detail but is not considered again. This is similar to most of the other characters considered, but is notable in the degree of attention given her personality followed by her complete absence. She is one of the only female characters considered at any length in the novel. The segment also advances Bill's increasing drug use and demonstrates a familiar background in the processes of selling



and using various types of drugs including junk. Herman is Burroughs' lightly fictionalized presentation of Herbert Huncke. This segment of text provides plot development, such as it is, with Bill's continuing drug use leading to his initial junk addiction or habit. Morphine use will consume the next several years of Bill's life. The characters introduced, notably Herman, become primary characters for a period of the novel but are not longitudinally prominent. This recurs with all characters presented except the narrator and, perhaps, his wife. Thus, character development beyond the narrator is nearly non-existent and the characters presented are perhaps best interpreted as vignettes or sketches more than more-traditionally defined fictional characters.



Pages 20-33

Pages 20-33 Summary

Bill, Herman, and Roy continuously make the rounds of doctors—Bill refers to them almost exclusively as croakers—soliciting prescriptions. Usually doctors are willing, at first, but quickly become resistant. Bill relates several experiences of wearing out the welcome of a physician. Meanwhile law enforcement begins to focus more attention on monitoring doctors and prosecuting drug users. All of this combines to give an ominous and threatening feel to the world of junkies. Herman is arrested and charged with giving the wrong address when filling a prescription—a common practice to avoid notice by the law. Bill sends Herman cigarette money. Bill is unable to obtain morphine and resorts to the unpleasant expedient of codeine injection into the skin.

Bill is arrested in his apartment and describes the arrest and the police interrogation tactics, noting that he is too sick from withdrawal symptoms to much care what happens. He eventually is locked up in a cell where he collapses into the pain of withdrawal. His wife bails him out. Bill spends several days depressed in his apartment, taking Benzedrine. After five days he begins to feel better, and after eight days he begins to eat again. Roy goes voluntarily into rehabilitation and emerges some time later free of his drug habit.

Bill and Roy immediately begin to search for drug supply, this time focusing their efforts on illegal heroin. Bill discusses the habits and appearances of typical heroin peddlers, noting that nearly always then end up financially ruined and incarcerated. He discusses several specific examples of dealers, including Irish, George the Greek, Pantopon Rose, Louie the Bellhop, Eric the Fag, the Beagle, the Sailor, and Joe the Mex. They are all distinct but most end up either dead or busted. In any case, Roy and Bill begin buying and using heroin capsules. Even Bill's monthly stipend is quickly exhausted by their habit and they turn to petty crime to secure funds for drugs. Bill acts as a screen and lookout while Roy rifles through the pockets of drunkards riding the subway. Bill recounts a particular, typical day in some detail. Roy spends a great deal of time explaining to Bill the various intricacies of robbing drunks on the subway and introducing him to the culture of the so-called lush-worker.

One night Roy and Bill spot a potential target that appears to offer a substantial amount of money—unfortunately he is not entirely passed out. They follow the mark onto the subway and engage in a lengthy process of robbing the man. In the end, he finally wakes up and realizes he has been robbed; he follows them off the subway and accosts them on the platform, physically attacking Roy and demanding his money. As the police start to close in Bill and Roy knock the man down, beat him, and run away. Roy later states that the entire episode has paid off—he hands Bill a few dollars. Bill, paranoid and uptight, concludes that his days as a lush-worker are over.



Pages 20-33 Analysis

The section introduces Bill's unnamed wife. It is remarkable that his significant other appears so lately in the text—appearing as a sort of *deus ex machina* to bail him out of jail. Her role will remain essentially unchanged throughout—a support mechanism which shows up from time to time without placing any undue demands. His unnamed wife briefly appears at a few other points in the text but is largely nonexistent. Later, Bill states that they have children together. It is altogether unclear whether his wife and children live with him throughout his drug use or join him only during his periods of non-use as various portions of the text first suggest one and then the other scenario. Even though Bill receives a considerable monthly stipend from his wealthy family the money is insufficient to support his heavy habit. The plot thus moves on from drug use to petty criminal activities. Bill and Roy form a lush-working team, specializing in preying upon drunkards riding the subway. This aspect of subculture forms an interesting aside in the text. Bill's behavior demonstrates that the addict—even the well-heeled addict—is reduced to any expediency to satisfy the addiction.

The various anecdotes presented in this section of the text are representative of a larger literary style embodied within the novel. The author refers to these vignettes generally as a 'routine', a word that has become strongly identified with Burroughs' literary style. They appear throughout the novel and in general are context-appropriate but plot-independent developments of tone and texture. They lend the novel a 'real-life' feel in that they are believable and appropriate but not particularly meaningful in the greater scheme of things. Some of the characters presented briefly are never discussed again and some are mentioned only in passing.

Bill's arrest is presented in considerable detail and the verbal exchange with the police is reported in terse prose. This construction is also retained throughout the novel and most of the prolonged dialogue presented is between police and Bill. When Bill speaks with his associates and friends the exchanges are short, to the point, and lucid. In contrast, the exchanges with police are prolonged, seemingly pointless, and fairly wandering. This segment of the text also builds on the use of slang terms to describe objects and events common to a junky.



Pages 34-49

Pages 34-49 Summary

Bill's legal case is resolved with a four-month suspended sentence. He gives up robbing drunks and starts to peddle junk. Bill forms a partnership with Bill Gains. They purchase junk and then cut it with milk-sugar and load it into capsules which they resell to other addicts. Bill discusses dosage, partitioning, and cutting techniques, and then comments on Gains' impressive history of drug use.

Bill develops several customers, one of whom is Nick, a hard-time operator who is always broke. He buys drugs for others and takes a portion of the drug from each capsule before passing them along. Nick is hugely addicted and completely unreliable; he introduces Bill to other questionable addicts including Tony and Ray. Bill suspects they are selling information to law enforcement but continues to sell to them anyway to support his own habit. Conversely, Gains has several reliable customers who have jobs and do not consort with law enforcement. Whenever Bill complains that their supplier is short-selling them, Gains cautions him to be quiet, noting that the drugs they procure are unusually pure. Gains then goes into a routine about his bowel movements and Bill is always put off.

Over the course of a few months most of Nick's regular secondary customers manage to locate Bill and circumvent Nick. They all complain of Nick's stealing. Bill thus meets Gene Doolie, a small and obnoxious man devoid of personality and an enormous security risk. Doolie stakes out Nick to locate Bill and then barges into Bill's apartment, buys drugs, and injects them before leaving. Doolie then implicates Nick, telling Bill that Nick is talking with police, hits Bill for drugs on credit, and acts like an obnoxious bum. Later, other secondary customers of Nick also track down Bill and begin to buy directly from him to avoid Nick's stealing. One customer named Marvin is allergic to junk—when he shoots up he passes out before even extracting the needle, slumping over and slowly bleeding in a stupor for hours.

Aside from his unreliable and suspect customers, Bill also picks up several reliable characters, but the constant presence of mooches and informers begins to wear on his nerves. Doolie suggests that Nick is informing; Nick suggests that Doolie is informing. Tony and Ray mooch, and Marvin is always teetering on the edge of death. One day Bill sells capsules to Ray at a restaurant and realizes they are being watched by agents. Bill leaves the restaurant and is followed. He flees on foot and manages to escape. When Bill complains to Gains, Gains snaps at him to be more careful. Bill begins to be increasingly paranoid and nervous.

After a few more weeks Bill is kicked out of his hotel for entertaining so many shady characters. He moves into another hotel, being careful to leave no connection. Nick begins to buy and pass drugs for rich kids who, Bill feels sure, will instantly cooperate with the police if they are arrested. When Bill discusses the situation with Gains, they



both decide they have to quit dealing and leave the area. They meet a crowd of mooches a final time, handing out their remaining drugs. Gains then goes into a voluntary commitment for rehabilitation and Bill drives to Texas.

Pages 34-49 Analysis

The various anecdotes presented in this section of the text are usually also 'routines.' They are context-appropriate but plot-independent developments of tone and texture. They lend the novel the feel of 'real-life' in that they are believable and appropriate but not particularly meaningful in the greater scheme of things. Some, if not most, of the characters presented briefly are never discussed again and some are mentioned only in passing. For example, Nick appears with regularity in this segment and then vanishes completely from the novel except for a single mention by Gains near the end of the novel—Gains tells Bill that both Tony and Nick have become police informers, or "have gone wrong," in the language of the novel.

The main development in this segment of the text is Bill's movement further into the drug culture. Instead of merely an addicted user, Bill becomes a minor peddler. He does this because he needs to support his habit and wants to avoid the complications of petty crime. He quickly realizes, however, that he has traded one set of complications for another. His users are all mooches, demanding drugs on credit which is never repaid. Many of them are also unreliable and, at least potentially, can inform on Bill to the police. Over the course of several months Bill finds his situation untenable and becomes paranoid and nervous. The segment also introduces Gains who Bill views as a mixture of mentor and grand-master of junk. Regardless of the situation, Gains appears unperturbed and self-assured. Thus, when Gains decides it's time to stop dealing, leave New York City, and seek a cure, Bill listens. Bill's transition to Texas is a major turning point in the novel and concludes the introductory period. He spends the next several months transitioning between Texas and New Orleans, before finally moving to Mexico City. Thus, the novel to this point can be viewed as the introductory matter to Bill's full-fledged addiction.



Pages 50-62

Pages 50-62 Summary

Bill drives to Texas with a small supply of junk. He plans to take a reduction cure. He has a bottle of water with about a week's worth of heroin dissolved in it. Every time he draws a shot from the bottle he replaces the volume with distilled water, thus diluting the drugs gradually, shot-by-shot. Four days later he has used all of the drugs and is stranded, immobilized by sickness, in Cincinnati. Out of desperation he voluntarily incarcerates himself in Lexington, Kentucky, in a prison facility with a ward dedicated to curing addicts. Bill checks in, is showered and processed, and educated about the process. Bill then enters general circulation and makes the acquaintance of various quirky addicts all in various stages of recovery. They all discuss drugs, drug use, and various ways of earning money. The treatment consists of sleep-aid drugs and daily symptom management injections. For several days Bill watches as an endless stream of new admissions enter the facility. He is then transferred to another area where all medication is withdrawn. After a few more days he is discharged, and he returns to Cincinnati where he buys and takes paregoric, and goes to sleep.

Bill then travels to Texas and stays clean for four months. He then travels to New Orleans where he extemporizes about the city's society and culture. One night he meets a penniless sailor and buys him some drinks. The man is mentally disturbed and rambles on about a putative connection between narcotics and Communism. Bill then cruises the gay bars in New Orleans and starts drinking heavily. He gets picked up by a young man who then robs him by trickery. Later, he meets a man named Pat and discusses with him drug use and drug smuggling. Pat and Bill buy heroin and inject some—Bill passes out from the strong drugs. Within a few days, Bill has developed a junk habit and begins to routinely buy drugs from Pat.

Pages 50-62 Analysis

This segment of the text is structurally problematic and, thematically, somewhat weak. Bill moves to Texas, then to New Orleans, and does not use drugs. After a forced recovery he manages to remain clean long enough to lose his drive for addiction and then spends perhaps a year off drugs. Presumably during this time he enjoys a more or less typical relationship with his wife and children and makes do with his monthly stipend plus whatever other funds he secures from his various business dealings. The tone of the text suggests that Bill's financial endeavors are perhaps not disastrous but are not markedly successful, either. Ironically, when Bill is not addicted to junk the plot wanders, the texture falters, and the tone becomes flat; clearly, the novel is junk-driven. From a plot perspective, the segment is largely transitional. Bill moves from his first addiction in New York City to a secondary addiction in New Orleans.



This section includes the first overt mention of Bill's homosexuality. This secondary plot element is often overlooked—or ignored—in *Junky* but forms a foundational component of the author's sequel novel *Queer*. In general, when Bill is not addicted to junk he has a bisexual appetite which a focused desire on younger men—particularly non-white men. His partners are often homosexual men or simply prostitutes. Bill repeatedly states that he dislikes gay culture and shuns it whenever possible.



Pages 63-83

Pages 63-83 Summary

Bill continues to buy drugs from Pat. Bill meets and describes several colorful junkies. As usual, they mostly are mooches and bums. Bill begins to partner with Pat and they buy drugs from various suppliers and resell them. They continue to peddle drugs until the police start snooping around their hotel. Some of their clients are arrested, and Pat's room is searched. Bill and Pat decide to stop selling and go back to buying from others. Law Enforcement in New Orleans begins to target drug addicts, arresting them for simply having injection scars.

One day Bill, Pat, and some others get into Bill's car and cruise several drug neighborhoods in search of junk. They are pulled over and the police find a few marijuana cigarettes on one of the other men. Since the car is Bill's, he is arrested and the vehicle is impounded. Bill's apartment is then illegally searched and his voluminous correspondence with various friends is seized and analyzed; some drugs and some pistols are also seized. The police begin the good-cop/bad-cop routine, and assume the automobile has been stolen. They threaten to incarcerate Bill's wife and even children. Bill, too junk-sick to argue, agrees to various procedures. Finally the police write a statement and Bill signs it.

Bill spends several hours in prison with some other junkies. He attempts to have his case handled by the Federal Government and he meets various law enforcement types. They question him in minute detail about many irrelevant aspects of his life. He reveals that his marriage is common-law and that he has studied psychiatry as a hobby. The police mistakenly assume he has a huge drug cache and is involved in selling stolen cars. The entire episode is reported at considerable length with much dialogue and posturing. His lawyer then arranges for him to briefly be transferred to a medical care facility to receive a shot of morphine.

The next morning Bill is bailed out, accompanied by his lawyer. The lawyer goes through a carefully orchestrated series of events, including overt bribery of a policeman, to indicate that Bill's mental condition was insufficient to be legally competent at the time of the signing of the statement. Bill is discharged into the care of a drug rehabilitation facility. After some initial confusion he receives curative treatment in the form of regular antihistamine injections. After several days Bill leaves the facility against medical advice.

Pages 63-83 Analysis

The various anecdotes presented in this section of the text are usually also 'routines.' They are context-appropriate but plot-independent developments of tone and texture. They lend the novel the feel of 'real-life' in that they are believable and appropriate but



not particularly meaningful in the greater scheme of things. Some, if not most, of the characters presented briefly are never discussed again and some are mentioned only in passing. This segment continues to develop Bill's further movement into the drug culture. Bill takes his New York City junk experience and moves into the New Orleans subculture, learning the various differences and adapting to them. Like Gains or Roy in earlier sections of the novel, Pat functions as a transient 'major' character. When Bill leaves New Orleans, it is as if Pat ceases to exist.

Most of this segment of the text is devoted to the events surrounding Bill's arrest. He carefully sets up the scene in a way that no true junky is at fault for the drug bust—only an ignorant 'tea head' would be caught with drugs in pocket. This strongly reinforces the novel's theme that junk is not merely a recreational drug but a way of life. The resultant arrest and interrogation are offered in considerable detail which is perhaps not warranted. The intricacies of the case revolve around an illegal search of Bill's apartment with the erroneous supposition that he holds major drug stocks and that he is somehow involved in an auto-theft organization. The dialogue in this segment is tight and well-written, but the thematic development of the police is somewhat irrelevant to the text and is presented with more weight than the plot bears. Suffice to say, Bill is arrested and embroiled in legal troubles. His attempt to have his case transferred to the Federal prosecutor fails because his case is not winnable in Federal court; thus, his case languishes in an overtly corrupt State legal system. The apparent intent of the presentation of such minutia is to present the reality of the legal systems and law enforcement techniques utilized to harass and suppress drug users. Similarly, Bill's prison stay is discussed.

The treatment of junk addiction and withdrawal symptoms with antihistamines is offered as a revolutionary process. The narrator suggests that future cures will, or at least should, all be based on similar treatments. Burroughs' lifetime obsession with various nontraditional methods of addiction treatment is well-known. In any case, antihistamines are here used to good effect and the narrator delivers a lengthy and 'scientific,' if fairly incoherent, discussion on the nature of the allergic-addiction system and junk. It should not be understood as valid medical practice.



Pages 84-92

Pages 84-92 Summary

After being discharged Bill goes home and spends some time feeling better, enjoying a resurgent sex drive, working, and eating. He meets with Pat and they discuss their respective cases. They talk with some of their former clients but Bill remains clean and has no desire to use drugs though Pat is still injecting. Bill learns that his case will be tried in the State courts, and that he is free to travel anywhere he pleases pending the court date. He decides to leave New Orleans and returns to Texas.

Bill lives for several months in the Texas river valley near Brownsville. He enters into various partnerships, acquires land through leases, and farms various crops. He describes the culture of the river valley at some length and in very amusing but unflattering terms, and even recounts some of the history of its development. Throughout the period Bill communicates with his attorney. His case development is not promising and Bill decides that he will spend time in jail. Instead, he flees to Mexico with plans to stay there indefinitely.

Pages 84-92 Analysis

The presentation of the Texas river valley between Brownsville and Mission is amusing, accurate, and extraneous to the text. Like the earlier segment discussing Bill's stay in Texas, the absence of drug use causes the segment to add little to the text's plot development or texture. In general, the section continues the transitory nature of the previous few chapters and moves Bill from the United States to Mexico as a fugitive from justice. It is interesting to compare the actual dialogue presented between Bill and his attorney and to contrast them to Bill's interpretation; it is not clear that a typical person would interpret the rather vague statements to mean imminent flight to a foreign country was recommended.



Pages 93-107

Pages 93-107 Summary

As soon as Bill arrives in Mexico City he begins searching for junk, apparently with no initial success. He visits several gay bars and engages in casual homosexual intercourse with a few partners. After several months Bill hires a lawyer to secure residence papers; while visiting the lawyer's office he meets another junky named Old Ike. All of the drug trade in Mexico City is controlled by a woman named Lupita, an enormously fat woman who began using drugs to control her weight. She went from being a user to being a pusher. Her network heavily bribes law enforcement and thus operates entirely in the open. Her prices are very steep and her product is heavily cut pantopon. Nevertheless, her stranglehold over the drug trade in Mexico City is complete. Old Ike, like almost all other junkies, bought from Lupita. Bill befriends Old Ike and begins to buy from Lupita and quickly develops a habit. Lupita's goods are so heavily cut and so expensive that Bill rapidly runs out of money. As Bill develops a heavy habit his wife complains bitterly, noting that when he is using he is boring and bored.

Bill and Old Ike become friends and spend several weeks paying doctors to write morphine scripts. Although the doctors are willing to write the prescriptions, the pharmacies hesitate to fill them. Old Ike then learns that he can apply for a government permit allowing him, as an unrepentant addict, to purchase a definite quantity of morphine each month. Old Ike goes through the application process even as Bill insists it is simply a scam. Much to their delight, the permit is issued. Bill supplies the cash and Old Ike purchases a vast amount of medical morphine every month—the two men split the purchase and use it to maintain their own strong habits. Over the next months Bill meets many small-time junkies in Mexico City. They spend much time in jail and are all entirely unreliable and suspect. Old Ike knows and disdains most of them, focusing his hatred on one in particular, known as the Black Bastard.

After a few months Old Ike is arrested and spends time in jail. Bill smuggles in some drugs and Old Ike is released. Bill develops a habit of three or four shots every day. He enrolls in college but finds it uninspiring. He comments on the passage of time while using morphine; nothing matters but the addiction. Life compresses into bare need. One day Bill has a minor crazy jag and attempts to kill his cat but his wife stops him. Old Ike periodically procures cocaine. Bill and Old Ike use cocaine but Bill finds it merely a distraction. Bill uses drugs for about one year in Mexico City, trying constantly to kick the habit. Each time he fails and becomes despondent over his lack of self-control. He develops a desire to quit but is unable. Finally, with the assistance of his wife and Old Ike, Bill manages to quit. He then turns immediately to Benzedrine and prodigious drinking and spends many weeks staggering around in a blind drunk. Most of his acquaintances tell him to return to junk to preserve his health.



Pages 93-107 Analysis

The initial paragraphs of this section are somewhat confusing from a chronological point of view. Bill states that upon arriving in Mexico City he immediately began searching for junk but the text implies that it was several months before he secured any drugs. This is starkly at odds with his statements about Mexico's 'dream' reality where desire creates reality. Bill—and his wife and his psychologist—has previously established that when using junk he does not engage in sexual activity; but after stating an immediate quest for junk Bill engages in several months of homosexual activity. The discussion of his sexual partners is interesting but largely irrelevant to the novel's dominant themes. Bill's lengthy discussion of Lupita is best categorized as development of place and setting rather than characterization. Lupita functions as environment and atmosphere, not as a person. Her presence explains why junk use is openly tolerated by law enforcement in the city but also made difficult and expensive through other means. For example, in New York City and New Orleans the line between user and peddler is blurry to non-existent and the primary junk-antagonistic force comes from law enforcement. In Mexico the line between user and peddler is blatant and, in fact, the peddler is the primary junk-antagonistic force. So antagonistic, in fact, Bill notes with disgust that Lupita pushes heavily cut pantopon instead of the strong brown Mexican heroin readily available in the United States.

Old Ike is a very well-developed character and highly distinctive from the run-of-the-mill addicts who show up elsewhere in the text. Burroughs was obviously particular to the character and noted that segments of the original manuscript describing him were cut only at great loss to the novel (refer to Appendix 3). Old Ike is a habitual, long-term user with no qualms about heavy and constant junk use. He is also quite generous and even tender from time to time, showing up when Bill is sick and caring for him like a younger brother or child. In fact, Bill even describes his face as womanish. Old Ike performs a nursing, mothering function for Bill which is entirely absent in the remainder of the novel. The two men form a tight partnership and enjoy an interesting, complex, and durable relationship.

The segment also indicates that Bill's drug use is becoming truly burdensome and destructive. Old Ike's ready and heavy supply captures Bill in a deep and profound addiction. His behavior becomes erratic; for example, he beats and intends to murder a cat. His wife, after suffering through years of addiction and petty crime is offended and estranged enough to finally leave him (either at this point or shortly hereafter—it is not immediately evident in the text). Even Old Ike becomes a less-frequent visitor. Bill himself becomes despondent over his uncontrollable drug use and attempts, many times, to quit. He finally succeeds by turning to heavy drinking and non-junk drug use—habits which he has repeatedly characterized as vulgar and destructive through the earlier segments of the text. Entirely consistent with the novel's thematic structure, Bill's alcohol use is completely more destructive and disturbing than his junk use.



Pages 108-126

Pages 108-126 Summary

Bill drinks heavily and begins to behave erratically. One day he becomes offended by someone in a bar. Without remembering why, he enters a rage and goes home where he fetches a revolver. He returns to the bar and accosts the man, intending to murder him. A policeman and the bartender intervene and take away the revolver. The police officer then takes him into the street and, releasing him, tells him to go home. Bill feels like his is in someone else's dream. He goes into another bar and begins drinking. When he awakens in a strange room, he returns home, staggering through the streets, and begins to have visions of doom. In his house he feels there is an intruder and he stalks around with a rifle. He then searches madly about for drugs, finally finding a tiny amount of codeine. Bill begins to feel that his mind is going when Old Ike appears. Old Ike cooks up a shot and doses Bill who finds some measure of peace.

Bill continues to drink and becomes desperately ill. He returns home and comments that his apartment stinks of urine. Old Ike visits and confirms that Bill himself stinks of urine. Bill becomes agitated and believes he is dying of uremia. He sends Old Ike to fetch a doctor; the doctor says there is nothing wrong, that Bill is a drunk and should stop drinking. Bill sends Old Ike to fetch another doctor; Old Ike returns with Rollins—a 'respectable' neighbor—and an expensive doctor. The second doctor diagnoses incipient uremia and orders Bill to stay away from alcohol. The doctor writes a prescription for antacids. Over the next few days Bill makes a remarkably and curious recovery and stays off drugs.

A few months go by while Bill spends his days reading newspapers. His wife has left him, taking the children to Acapulco. Bill meets Old Ike and they catch up. Old Ike then accompanies Bill home and gives him a shot of cocaine and morphine. They sit and smoke and Old Ike complains bitterly about the Black Bastard.

Over the next few months Bill meets many expatriate Americans who have fled an increasingly-oppressive anti-drug bias in the United States. He expounds on various laws passed in several states and discusses the illegality of drug use. Most of the new junkies are young and hip and have carried the marijuana lingo into the heroin culture; Bill learns many new hip words for things. On one occasion Bill eats peyote with some other junkies from America and he describes the feeling of turning into a plant. Eventually Bill is disgusted by the younger generation's inability to stolidly use junk without histrionics.

Gains flees the United States and arrives in Mexico. He tells Bill that some of their associates have died, that Tony and Nick become informers, and that Herman is still in jail. Marvin died from an overdose. Roy turned informer and then was incarcerated; finding his situation untenable he committed suicide. Gains tells Bill that many of the new addicts are very young. Several days later Gains and Bill form a partnership and



purchase a full ounce of heroin. Something is apparently wrong with the drug, however, and when Gains injects some he becomes agitated and then catatonic. The next day he is recovered.

Pages 108-126 Analysis

In the opening portions of this segment Bill continues to kick his junk habit by heavy binge drinking. Every day seems him drinking hard and early. Acquaintances either shun him or lose track of him and he spends entire days staggering into objects and falling down in the street. When he was on junk Bill was competent but withdrawn; drunk he is obnoxious, sloppy, and intolerable—but social. He experiences some of the vicissitudes of the 'lush' life that he caused others in New York City as a lush-worker. His encounter with the man, the barkeep, and the policeman is instructive of meaningless, blind rage which consumes him. His visions of doom and societal collapse—the prevalence of the virus and the exterminator—further indicate the depth to which his drinking has driven his soul. Finally, and mercifully, his body rebels and collapses. Old Ike, as usual, essentially saves him by determining through a ridiculous pantomime of snuffling that it is in fact Bill that stinks of piss. Incipient uremia is diagnosed, seemingly by Bill's insistence that it be diagnosed. In a plot twist as ironic as it is unlikely, Bill is 'cured' from his alcoholism by use of antacids. Thematically, it echoes his junk cure by use of antihistamines, suggesting that substance abuse is really a reaction to a basic upset in fundamental biological systems rather than a mental process.

After recovering his health the novel moves into a definite closing phase. Bill's wife has definitely departed with the children. His legal troubles, coupled with his illegal flight to avoid prosecution, prevent him from safely returning home. His old-time acquaintances have finally recognized what he has known all along—Mexico is preferable to the United States for junkies. In a series of brief and often chance encounters Bill learns the ultimate textual fate of many minor characters—loose strings are tied up. Bill even engages in a final drug deal, scoring a full ounce of heroin—but something is wrong with it. Instead of being the junk of dreams it is more like poison and even the hardened Gains finds it very uncomfortable. Bill has moved beyond junk.



Pages 127-128

Pages 127-128 Summary

Bill does not use drugs habitually but is surrounded by junkies and addicts. His wife and children are gone and he has no desire to pursue another heroin addiction. He equates giving up junk to giving up a way of life. He reads about yage, a South American plant, which supposedly contains a drug that stimulates latent telepathy. Deeply intrigued, he decides to travel to Columbia in search of the drug.

Pages 127-128 Analysis

The final brief segment of the novel sets up the future—the bizarre *Künstlerroman* draws to a conclusion with the matured and capable Bill Lee mastering junk and alcohol, looking forward to new frontiers in ever more-distant lands. Bill has been stripped of all support systems, his nationality, his culture, his health, his family, even his language, and even his addiction. He remains a forty-something white man obsessed with homosexual desire and bodily pleasure brought about by altered states.



Pages 129-166

Pages 129-166 Summary

The remainder of the text includes an assortment of materials. A glossary of slang terms is presented. A lengthy section of text cut from the original manuscript is also presented as Appendix 1. In this section Bill reads about a new quack medical treatment and tries it with promising results; he then extemporizes about the cellular metabolism of junk.

The original author's introduction to the manuscript is presented as Appendix 2. It is quite informative and forms an excellent introduction to the text. Appendix 3 presents a letter from the author to the original publisher which criticizes certain textual changes made in the first edition. Appendices 4, 5, 6, and 7 present introductions or concise analyses of the texts from previous editions including materials written by Allen Ginsberg and Carl Solomon from 1952 to 1977. The text concludes with several pages of notes documenting various textual additions or corrections in the definitive edition.

Pages 129-166 Analysis

The various supporting materials offered have a varied publication history. The glossary has always been included with the text; it is Burroughs' definition of the terms used in the novel and—interestingly—of terms not occurring in the novel. It gives a definite non-fiction feel to the text. The lengthy section cut—titled Chapter 28—which is presented makes it obvious that Burroughs was, however, writing a novel. Whereas the author found the text interesting he realized it was entirely inappropriate to the fictional work. The author's original introduction is insightful and quite valuable, and establishes the principle themes found in the novel. The remaining appendices are interesting mostly for their historical aspects and are probably only appreciated by the Burroughs aficionado.



Characters

William (

William Lee—Bill—is the narrator and protagonist of the novel. He states he was born 1914 to an established, wealthy family. He describes himself in general terms only: short brown hair, a thin body with light and sparse black body hair. He grew up in an apparently typical familial situation but was plagued by various nervous conditions such as nightmares and hallucinations. His athletic performance was mediocre and his academic performance was average or slightly above. He attended a typical suburban high school but gravitated toward an interest in criminal behavior. Lee was a loner and a petty vandal but graduated and proceeded to an Ivy League university where he read English with moderate success, graduating with honors. While at university he met a clique of homosexual artists but was largely put off by their posturing. After graduating he began to receive a lifelong monthly stipend sufficient for reasonable needs. He traveled through Europe where he apparently engaged in securing the casual services of female and male prostitutes. He returned to the United States and drifted through a variety of interests and odd jobs while pursuing psychoanalysis. He was inducted into the army during the draft for World War II. Hating the army routine he arranged to be discharged on mental health issues, citing the fact that he had cut off his own finger in the past. After being discharged he wandered through several odd jobs and then became addicted to heroin. Suddenly, his monthly stipend was insufficient for his needs and he began in earnest to turn to a life of petty crime.

The novel details a period of several years in Bill's life, beginning with his first use of morphine and ending with his decision to seek out new non-junk drug in South America. The novel can be divided into three main portions with two concise transitional segments between each major portion. Initially Bill is an addict and peddler in New York City. He then kicks his habit and transitions briefly through Texas to New Orleans where he enjoys some homosexual encounters and then again becomes addicted. Fleeing legal troubles he then transitions back to Texas where he again remains drug free, and then moves to Mexico City. In Mexico City he remains drug free and is an active homosexual for several months before developing his third addiction. By the end of the novel he has kicked the habit a third and presumably final time and, putatively freed of junk's insatiable appeal, he looks forward to new non-junk drugs in far-flung locales.

Bill's wife and children

Bill is married to an unnamed woman by common-law and has an undisclosed number of children. His wife is mentioned only a few times in the text and the children referred to only indirectly. Bill and his wife were apparently married before the beginning of the novel. Bill's wife is incredibly long-suffering and tolerant. Although she does not use drugs, she remains with Bill for several years through his addiction, appearing from time to time to bail him out. Her main objection to his drug use appears to be the inactivity it



causes. By the end of the novel, even her patience has been expended and she has left Bill and taken the children. Bill mentions this as casually as he mentions meeting a new junky.

Roy

Roy is one of the first junk users that Bill meets during the novel. Bill describes him as having a slack jaw, a vacant look, and smooth brown skin. Roy's cheek-bones are high, giving him a vaguely oriental appearance, and his ears stick out at right angles from his asymmetrical skull. Roy has brown, brilliant eyes. Roy meets Bill and begins to buy stolen morphine from him. Later, Bill begins to use morphine and Roy strongly urges him to resist the drug. Within a few months, Roy and Bill are regularly using drugs together and Bill has developed a habit. Roy and Bill then spend a great deal of time moving around New York City in an attempt to locate drugs. Roy has a full-time, live-in girlfriend who Bill refers to as Roy's "old lady." Roy describes himself as somewhat bisexual. When Bill leaves New York Roy undergoes voluntary incarceration to get off drugs. Late in the novel Bill learns that Roy had become an informer in an attempt to be freed from jail. His jail sentence remained undiminished, however, and after a few weeks Roy commits suicide by hanging himself.

Herman

Herman first meets Bill when Bill is fencing some stolen property. Bill describes Herman as a small, very thin man with a mottled yellow complexion and skin eruptions. Herman's mouth is usually drawn down at the corners and he is often rude and abrasive. Upon their first meeting Herman takes an immediate and intensely hostile dislike to Bill. After several weeks' of acquaintance, however, the two men become associates and eventual friends. Herman and Bill form a temporary partnership to peddle marijuana but give it up after awhile because it is not monetarily profitable. Herman is a consummate mooch and always manages to live with someone else, rent-free—at one point living with Bill. At some point after Bill leaves New York City Herman is arrested on unspecified charges. At the conclusion of the novel Herman is still incarcerated.

Bill Gains

Gains is a junky who meets Bill Lee after they are both addicted to junk. Gains was raised in a typical upper-middle class house—his father had been a bank president. Gains makes money by stealing and pawning overcoats. Gains is described as being a composite of negatives and, thus, nearly completely undetectable to the average citizen, even when wearing their own overcoat. Gains has lifeless, pale blue eyes and a malicious childlike smile. Gains, unlike most junkies, likes to see other people develop a junk habit and therefore hands out drugs on credit to younger users. Bill describes Gains as a parish priest of heroin. At the end of the novel Gains leaves the United



States for the relative safety of Mexico. On the plane ride he uses drugs by drilling a hole in his leg and pumping morphine through the wound—Bill views the act as an astonishingly proficient procedure capable of being performed only by such a legendary figure as Gains.

Gene Doolie

Gene Doolie is a junky who buys drugs from Bill when he is peddling them in New York City. Bill describes Doolie as a scrawny little Irishman who behaves somewhat like a homosexual pimp. Doolie is a known police informer and habitual collaborator. His voice is unbearable—a shrill, grating whine. Doolie is devoid of empathy and personality; Bill describes him as a hostile, intrusive force. Doolie is a minor but memorable character in the novel.

Pat

Pat is a junky and drug dealer in New Orleans. Bill, who meets Pat in a gay bar, describes him as having a peasant face. Pat is Irish and has intuition, and a shrewd malice about him. Pat supplies heroin to Bill who nearly overdoses, and then regularly supplies him for several weeks. Eventually Pat and Bill form a partnership to buy and resell drugs. They are arrested together and Pat spends a brief period in jail and then returns to drug use. Pat remains in New Orleans while Bill moves to Texas and, later, Mexico.

Lupita

Lupita is an established drug lord in Mexico City during the time period discussed in the novel. She is enormously fat, weighing around three hundred pounds, and began using drugs in an unsuccessful bid to control her weight. Only her face got thin. Lupita heavily bribes law enforcement and therefore operates entirely in the open. Her product is very expensive and heavily cut pantopon, but her stranglehold on the drug trade ensures there is no meaningful competition. Lupita is a colorful but minor character in the latter portion of the novel.

Angelo

Angelo is a male prostitute who is not homosexual by inclination. Bill describes him as Japanese-looking except for his copper skin. Bill pays Angelo twenty pesos every time they have sex. Whenever Angelo spends the night at Bill's apartment he sweeps the floor before leaving in the morning. Angelo knows Bill on and off for a period of several months in Mexico City but is a very minor character in the novel, important mainly for establishing Bill's homosexuality.



Old Ike

Old Ike is a junky who lives in Mexico City. Bill describes him as a shabby, middle-aged man with a toothless mouth and withered brown skin. Old Ike has used drugs for twenty-eight years at the time he makes Bill's acquaintance. He supports himself by selling religious medals or objects made from fake silver. Ole Ike supplies Bill with drugs until Bill develops a strong habit. Then Old Ike gets a legal medical dispensation to purchase morphine in bulk; Bill supplies the funds and the two men split the medical morphine supply for personal use. Eventually Bill stops using drugs and Old Ike drifts away, continuing as an addict. Late in the novel Old Ike appears again and gives Bill an occasional injection. Of all the characters presented in the novel, Old Ike is the most developed—still only marginally more than a vignette—and also one of the most unique.

Rollins

Rollins is a man who Bill has known for many decades and again meets in Mexico City. The exact nature of their relationship is vague. Rollins apparently is not involved in the shady aspects of drug use and views Bill's drunken wanderings with some disgust. Later, Rollins brings a doctor to call on Bill. Bill describes Rollins as in his mid-forties, solidly built, with strong handsome features and wiry black hair. Rollins dresses in expensive clothes and is apparently a respectable person. Bill trusts Rollins in serious matters; Rollins is a minor character in the novel.



Objects/Places

Junk

Junk is the term used in the text for narcotics derived from opium. The text states that junk includes morphine, heroin, Dilaudid, pantopon, codeine, and dionine, among other derivatives. Although not specifically included, paregoric is also a form of junk.

Burroughs defines a 'fix' of junk as one-half grain of morphine or the equivalent.

Someone who is addicted to junk is said to have a habit and is referred to as a junky.

Habit

Burroughs states that only junk is habit forming and then defines a habit as dependency on junk. He states that an initial habit is only formed after at least a month of daily injections, two months of routine smoking, or four months of daily ingestion of junk.

Subsequent habits are developed far more quickly.

Cure

Various methods of overcoming drug addiction are described as a cure; e.g., an addict receives a cure which removes his dependency from junk. Various self-imposed cures are discussed and described, as are several medical cures. In general, they appear to be fairly ineffective.

Works

The items a junky uses to inject junk. They are described as a needle, a strip of paper wrapped around the needle to form a collar, and a dropper slipped over the paper collar. The works are preferred to a hypodermic as they are easier to use. The works also include a spoon or other small container in which drugs are heated or cooked. Junkies often hide their works outside to avoid incrimination during searches by law enforcement.

Cottons

When drugs are cooked in a spoon they are in a liquid form. This liquid is drawn into a dropper for later injection. To assist the drawing up from the spoon a piece of cotton is used first to absorb the liquid. The cotton thus retains a tiny amount of drugs. Junkies collect these cottons as a sort of reserve supply in case of emergencies. If junk cannot be otherwise obtained, old cottons can be aggregated and cooked up in bulk to provide some trace of drugs. The text refers to cotton use in time of extremity only and thus they are viewed as a symbol of desperation.



Croaker

A slang term for a medical doctor. The novel's interest in croakers is principally because they can, and do, write prescriptions for morphine or opiates. Much of the text is devoted to consideration of individual croakers' habits and behaviors and to an examination of them as a class.

Drugs

The text enumerates many drugs beyond junk. Burroughs considers them to be all non-addictive and thus fundamentally unlike junk. He specifically enumerates and uses Bensedrine, cocaine, Nembutal, and marijuana. Burroughs also generally considers alcohol to be synonymous with non-junk drugs.

Lush-Worker

A lush-worker is a petty criminal who specializes in robbing unconscious drunks, or luses. Lush-workers frequently work in teams; one man, known as the hook, provides cover and acts as a lookout while the other man rifles through the pockets of the drunkard. Lush-workers prefer cash but will steal any item of value, including overcoats, belts, and shoes. These items are subsequently pawned or traded.

New York City

The first major locale and setting of the novel, New York City is a major urban center in the United States. Burroughs enumerates several specific neighborhoods as being hot pots of junk dealing. The city is not particularly described or considered and acts simply as a major urban area suffering from blight.

Mexico City

The final major locale and setting of the novel, Mexico City is a major urban center in Mexico. Burroughs discusses several specific bars or places within the city but does not discuss it in the same terms as New York City. Instead, Mexico City is discussed at some length and various cultural and social aspects are developed. The area in which Bill lives in Mexico appears to be roughly middle-class.

Themes

Junk, Junkies, and Addiction

By any estimation the dominant theme of the novel is junk; that is, opiate narcotic drugs including, most often, morphine or heroin. In essence, the novel can be viewed as a nearly biographical rendition of life as it appears to a junky, deeply connected with the illicit world of drug use, drug sales and purchases, and addiction. All aspects of the narrator's life throughout the bulk of the novel are suppressed entirely beneath the crushing need to obtain and inject junk. Anything which prevents or even mediates junk use is viewed as expendable, objectionable, and wrong. Anything which assists and enhances junk use is presented as enjoyable, worthwhile, and right. This devastating need goes beyond simply contrivance—friends are enjoyable but expendable, lovers are enjoyable but expendable, even immediate family is enjoyable—but expendable.

The author's original introduction establishes this dominant theme of the novel by way of explaining the primary presumed purpose of the novel—to write an accurate novel about junk and junk use including information obtainable only through personal experience. If one considers the literary axiom of 'write what you know', Burroughs has certainly captured in *Junky* what he knows.

Correcting Misconceptions about Junk, Junkies, and Addiction

A corollary theme to that of junk, junkies, and addiction is the theme of correcting misconceptions about junk, junkies, and addiction. Beyond merely portraying an accurate picture, Burroughs' stated secondary purpose was to establish the facts about junk and junk use by dispelling the many incorrect myths and ideas commonly held. Burroughs enumerated ten specific ideas in the original author's forward which he considered particularly egregious and harmful toward junkies in society. He assertively seeks to dispel these beliefs as pure and incorrect myth by replacing them with factual data concerning the topic in question. Named are the beliefs that most drugs are similar and habit forming; that addiction forms quickly; that escape from addiction is nearly impossible; that addiction leads to death; that addiction leads to ever-increasing drug consumption; that addicts like being addicted; that users and peddlers are distinct groups; that peddlers attempt to hook others; that drugs cause insanity; and that drugs cause crime.

It is ironic and more than a little amusing that after asserting these all to be manifestly false, the novel does a fairly good job of presenting several of them as factual. For example, Bill finds himself in Mexico City nearly unable to escape from addiction; many of the junkies in the novel die early; Bill and other characters use ever-larger quantities of drugs as the novel progresses; Bill and some other characters—Gains and Old Ike—



revel in their drug addiction; and Bill himself repeatedly turns to petty crime to fund his addiction.

Cellular Metabolism and the Nature of Junk

Probably the most peculiar theme in the novel deals with Burroughs'—hence Bill's—nearly unique and obviously distinct view on the nature of addiction. The novel frequently states that junk is unique among all drugs; other drugs are not addictive. The novel uses circular reasoning here, however, defining addiction as habitual and depending junk use—thus it is logical that non-junk drugs could not be addictive. Several lengthy and often rather bizarre sections of the novel then consider addiction from a quasi-medical perspective. These segments are often written with a scientific gloss as if the narrator were speaking with some education or authority about addiction. For example, the narrator states that years after any drug use the body's cells still contain latent junk which twitches at the proximity of other junk. The junky's body is thus a sort of Geiger counter, instinctively aware when junk is afoot. Other passages suggest that junk, once injected, acquires some sentience and possesses a motive force; that the drug is a symbiotic life form attempting a complete parasitic takeover of the host. Much of this is couched in Burroughs-esque terminology of the virus and the plague, but much of it is presented as medically and scientifically factual. This angle is probably best demonstrated by the rambling and lengthy discussion of addiction as a form of allergic reaction—hence Bill's second addiction is painlessly and entirely cured by the application of antihistamines.

Style

Point of View

The novel is narrated in the first-person point of view by a William "Bill" Lee. The narrator is traditionally interpreted to be a fictionalized self-portrayal of the author—Lee was the maiden name of William S. Burroughs' mother. Even close associates and intimate friends of the novel have commented on the autobiographical elements of the text. The author has lived the lifestyle described in the novel and the authentic, gritty portrayal of the life of a junky is accurate beyond dispute. The narrative is delivered in terse sentences with standard paragraphing and an easily accessible chronology. Shifts in setting are obvious and the simple construction and traditionally point of view lend an immediacy and urgency to the material which is difficult to deny.

The narrator delivers the story in credible and truthful prose. Drug use is not glamorized or romanticized—quite the opposite, in fact. Bill describes a life devoid of meaning or function beyond the demanding obsession of addiction. In other words, if it leads to junk then Bill is interested—if it's not about junk, it's not worth his consideration. The point of view utilized is appropriate for the type of 'tell-all' first hand account presented by the novel.

Setting

The novel features three traditional settings occurring in chronological order with two brief transitional segments. The first setting is New York City, the second setting is New Orleans, and the third and final setting is Mexico City. The transition between New York City and New Orleans involves travel through Cincinnati and Texas but is essentially a flat structural development of plot. The transition between New Orleans and Mexico City is amusing and well-developed but is, again, in essence simply a structural development of plot.

The three settings are well-known locales and they are presented in terms that are intended to be accurate and representative. New York City is the least developed setting. Although various specific locales and even addresses are enumerated the city is mostly presented as highly urbanized and fairly blighted. The characters spend their time in flophouses, crappy apartments, and riding subways looking for drunks to rob. The setting is not developed beyond what a normal reader would imply about New York City. New Orleans is somewhat more developed—when Bill moves to that city he extemporizes on New Orleans' unique culture and appears to embrace wholeheartedly certain aspects of its liberality. Beyond this casual introduction, however, no serious attempt is made to describe New Orleans as a distinctive setting. In this respect it too functions primarily as a urbanized and blighted locale composed of gay bars, dirty apartments, and injecting drug users. The final locale, Mexico City, is discussed in both physical and metaphysical terms and is the most-developed of the three major settings.



Although Bill describes it in physical terms—bars, houses, etc.—he also describes it in metaphysical terms as a place where desire creates reality. In this mystical foreign place, Bill is finally able to extend beyond his addiction and—putatively, at least—finds the final kick for junk and becomes clean thereafter.

Language and Meaning

The text is presented in standard English with additions. A large amount of street slang is utilized both in dialogue and in narrative content. Most, but not all, of this slang is summarized and somewhat defined in the included glossary, published alongside all versions of the text. The glossary is slightly problematic, however, as it uses circular logic such as "Hep...is not subject to definition because, if you don't 'dig' what it means, no one can ever tell you" (p. 130). The slang use is consistent and authoritative, however, and reads as well as other portions of the text. Thus, meaning is not obscured and the addition of slang gives a gritty and realistic texture to the novel. It is of particular interest that the author's critical letter to the initial publisher (Appendix 3) speaks to as many alterations of slang as it does to alterations of standard construction.

Meaning within the text is somewhat more difficult. The text is a topical novel with a tightly focused theme of junk and junk use. The narrative itself is structured around junk addiction such that periods of time described when the narrator is not using junk are usually described in flat and detached methods. The most colorful and memorable segments of the text deal with the act of drug use; descriptive and personal terms are used such that the reader is fairly compelled to align personal views with the views of the unsavory narrator: this is the crowning achievement of the text.

Structure

The 128-page novel has always been published in conjunction with a five-page fictional prologue and a five-page glossary. The edition currently under consideration includes a fairly lengthy scholastic introduction and a variety of end-matter including introductions from previous editions. The novel has been published in three major revisions. The initial 1953 Ace publication, entitled "Junkie: Confessions of an Unredeemed Drug Addict" was published in one cover with another novel and marketed as a sensationalist 'pulp fiction' product. A later 1977 Penguin edition was textually restored and included several thousand additional words; this edition is the most-commonly encountered version of the text. A recent 2003 Penguin edition—considered in this summary—adds an additional several thousand words as well as making numerous textual corrections. This latest major edition is entitled "Junky - 50th Anniversary Definitive Edition" and attempts to completely align the printed text with the original manuscript as intended by the author; it also presents a variety of supplemental materials including introductions and considerations from previous editions.

Early versions of the novel were often published with so-called chapter enumeration; the original manuscript did not feature these divisions and thus the definitive text uses only

a printer's mark to note divisions in the text; they are clearly not chapter divisions in the typical sense. The structure of the novel, from the sentences through the paragraphing and the chronological timeline, are all designed to make the text easily accessible and they aid materially in allowing an easy understanding of the material presented.



Quotes

"The question is frequently asked: Why does a man become a drug addict?

"The answer is that he usually does not intend to become an addict. You don't wake up one morning and decide to be a drug addict. It takes at least three months' shooting twice a day to get any habit at all. And you don't really know what junk sickness is until you have had several habits. It took me almost six months to get my first habit, and then the withdrawal symptoms were mild. I think it no exaggeration to say it takes about a year and several hundred injections to make an addict.

"The questions, of course, could be asked: Why did you ever try narcotics? Why did you continue using it long enough to become an addict? You become a narcotics addict because you do not have strong motivations in the other direction. Junk wins by default. I tried it as a matter of curiosity. I drifted along taking shots when I could score. I ended up hooked. Most addicts I have talked to report a similar experience. They did not start using drugs for any reason they can remember. They just drifted along until they got hooked. If you have never been addicted, you can have no clear idea what it means to need junk with the addict's special need. You don't decide to be an addict. One morning you wake up sick and you're an addict." (Prologue, p. xxxviii)

"A few nights after meeting Roy and Herman, I used one of the syrettes, which was my first experience with junk. A syrette is like a toothpaste tube with a needle on the end. You push a pin down through the needle; the pin punctures the seal; and the syrette is ready to shoot.

"Morphine hits the back of the legs first, then the back of the neck, a spreading wave of relaxation slackening the muscles away from the bones so that you seem to float without outlines, like lying in warm salt water. As this relaxing wave spread through my tissues, I experienced a strong feeling of fear. I had the feeling that some horrible image was just beyond the field of vision, moving, as I turned my head, so that I never quite saw it. I felt nauseous; I lay down and closed my eyes. A series of pictures passed, like watching a movie: A huge, neon-lighted cocktail bar that got larger and larger until streets, traffic, and street repairs were included in it; a waitress carrying a skull on a tray; stars in a clear sky. The physical impact of the fear of death; the shutting off of breath; the stopping of blood.

"I dozed off and woke up with a start of fear. Next morning I vomited and felt sick until noon." (p. 6)

"Always build a John up. If he has any sort of a body at all say, "Oh, don't ever hurt me." A John is different from a sucker. When you're with a sucker you're on the alert all the time. You give him nothing. A sucker is just to be taken. But a John is different. You give him what he pays for. When you're with him you enjoy yourself and you want him to enjoy himself, too.

"If you want to really bring a man down, light a cigarette in the middle of intercourse. Of course, I really don't like men at all sexually. What I really dig is chicks. I get a kick out of taking a proud chick and breaking her spirit, making her see she is just an animal. A



chick is never as beautiful after she's been broken. 'Say, this is sort of a fireside kick,' she said, pointing to the radio which was the only light in the room.

"Her face contorted into an expression of monkey-like rage as she talked about men who accosted her on the street. 'Sonofabitch!' she snarled. 'They can tell when a woman isn't looking for a pickup. I used to cruise around with brass knuckles on under my gloves just waiting for one of those peasants to crack at me.'" (p. 13)

"I recall one night Herman and I were caught short with nothing but some codeine sulphate. Herman cooked up first and shot one grain in the vein. Immediately he turned very red, then very pale. He sat down weakly on the bed. 'My God,' he said.

"'What's the matter?' I asked. 'It's perfectly all right.'

"He gave me a sour look. 'All right, is it? Well, you shoot some then.'

"I cooked up a grain and got out my works ready to take the shot. Herman watched me eagerly. He was still sitting on the bed. As soon as I took the needle out of my arm I felt an intense and most unpleasant prickling sensation entirely different from the prickles you get from a good shot of morphine. I could feel my face swelling. I sat down on the bed next to Herman. My fingers were puffed up double size.

"'Well,' said Herman, 'is it all right?'

"'No,' I said." (pp. 21-22)

"'The Fag scored again,' he said. 'Two notes and a wristwatch down at 96th Street.' Roy muttered something and looked at his paper. The man went on talking in a loud voice. 'I had one come up on me. "What are you doing with your hand in my pocket?" he says.'

"'For Chris' sake, don't talk like that!' Roy said and walked away from him. 'Fucking wrong bastard,' he muttered. 'There aren't many lush-workers around now. Only the Fag, the Beagle, and that tramp. They all envy the Fag because he makes good scores. If a sucker comes up on him he pretends to feel his leg like he was a fag. Those tramps at 103rd Street go around saying "Goddam Fag" because they can't score. He's no more a fag than I am.' Roy paused reflexively. 'Not as much, in fact.'" (p. 29)

"His veins were mostly gone, retreated back to the bone to escape the probing needle. For a while he used arteries, which are deeper than veins and harder to hit, and for this procedure he bought special long needles. He rotated from his arms and hands to the veins of his feet. A vein will come back in time. Even so, he had to shoot in the skin about half the time. But he only gave up and 'skinned' a shot after an agonizing half-hour of probing and poking and cleaning out the needle, which would stop up with blood." (p. 36)

"Some people are allergic to junk. One time I delivered a cap to Marvin and he took a shot. I was looking out the window—it is nerve-racking to watch someone probe for a vein—and when I turned around I noticed his dropper was full of blood. He had passed out and the blood had run back into the dropper. I called to Nick and he pulled the needle out and slapped Marvin with a wet towel. He came around partly and muttered something.



"I guess he's O.K.," I said. 'Let's cut.'

"He looked like a corpse slumped there on the dirty, unmade bed, his limp arm stretched out, a drop of blood slowly gathering at the elbow.

"As we walked downstairs, Nick told me that Marvin had been after him for my address.

"Listen," I said, 'if you give it to him, you can find yourself a new connection. One thing I don't need is somebody dying in my apartment.'

"Nick looked hurt. 'Of course I won't give him your address.'

"What about Doolie?"

"I don't know how he got the address. I swear I don't." (p. 43)

"I tell the croaker I've got an aged mother and she uses this prescription for piles. After you get the sweet oil drained off, you put the stuff in a tablespoon and hold it over a gas flame. That burns the phenol right out. It'll hold you for twenty-four hours." (p. 52)

"Occasionally, you find intact personalities in a queer bar, but fags set the tone of these joints, and it always brings me down to go into a queer bar. The bring-down piles up.

After my first week in a new town I have had about all I can take of these joints, so my bar business goes somewhere else, generally to a bar in or near Skid Row.

"But I backslide now and then. One night, I got lobotomized drunk in Frank's and went to a queer bar. I must have had more drinks in the queer joint, because there was a lapse of time. It was getting light outside when the bar hit one of those sudden pockets of quiet. Quiet is something that does not often happen in a queer joint. I guess most of the fags had left. I was leaning against the bar with a beer I didn't want in front of me. The noise cleared like smoke and I saw a red-haired kid was looking straight at me and standing about three feet away.

"He didn't come on faggish, so I said, 'How you making it?' or something like that.

"He said: 'Do you want to go to bed with me?'

"I said, 'O.K. Let's go.'" (p. 60)

"He asked the question they all ask. 'Why do you feel that you need narcotics, Mr. Lee?'

"When you hear this question you can be sure that the man who asks it knows nothing about junk.

"I need it to get out of bed in the morning, to shave and eat breakfast.'

"I mean psychically.'

"I shrugged. Might as well give him his diagnosis so he will go. 'It's a good kick.'

"Junk is not a 'good kick.' The point of junk to a user is that it forms the habit. No one knows what junk is until he is junk sick.

"The doctor nodded. Psychopathic personality. He stood up. Suddenly he moved his face into a smile that was obviously intended to be understanding and to dissolve my reticence. The smile took over and ended up an insane leer. He leaned forward and brought his smile close to my face.

"Is your sex life satisfactory?' he asked. 'Do you and your wife have satisfactory sex?'

"Oh yes,' I said, 'when I'm not on the junk.'

"He straightened up. He didn't like my answer at all.

"Well, I'll see you again.' He blushed and lunged awkwardly for the door. I had made



him for a faker when he walked in the room—obviously he was putting down a self-assured routine for himself and the others—but I had expected a deeper and tougher front.

"The doctor told my wife I had a very bad prognosis. My attitude towards junk was 'so what?' A relapse was to be expected because the psychic determinants of my condition remained in operation. He could not help me unless I agreed to cooperate. Given cooperation, he apparently was ready to take down my psyche and reassemble it in eight days." (p. 82)

"There is a type person occasionally seen in these neighborhoods who has connections with junk, though he is neither a user nor a seller. But when you see him the dowser wand twitches. Junk is close. His place of origin is the Near East, probably Egypt. He has a large straight nose. His lips are thin and purple-blue like the lips of a penis. The skin is tight and smooth over his face. He is basically obscene beyond any possible vile act of practice. He has the mark of a certain trade or occupation that no longer exists. If junk were gone from the earth, there might still be junkies standing around in junk neighborhoods feeling the lack, vague and persistent, a pale ghost of junk sickness.

"So this man walks around in the places where he once exercised his obsolete and unthinkable trade. But he is unperturbed. His eyes are black with an insect's unseeing calm. He looks as if he nourished himself on honey and Levantine syrups that he sucks up through a sort of proboscis.

"What is his lost trade? Definitely of a servant class and something to do with the dead, though he is not an embalmer. Perhaps he stores something in his body—a substance to prolong life—of which he is periodically milked by his masters. He is as specialized as an insect, for the performance of some inconceivably vile function." (p. 93)

"One morning in April, I woke up a little sick. I lay there looking at shadows on the white plaster ceiling. I remembered a long time ago when I lay in bed beside my mother, watching lights from the street move across the ceiling and down the walls. I felt the sharp nostalgia of train whistles, piano music down a city street, burning leaves.

"A mild degree of junk sickness always brought me the magic of childhood. 'It never fails,' I thought. 'Just like a shot. I wonder if all junkies score for this wonderful stuff.'

"I went into the bathroom to take a shot. I was a long time hitting a vein. The needle clogged twice. Blood ran down my arm. The junk spread through my body, an injection of death. The dream was gone. I looked down at the blood that ran from elbow to wrist. I felt a sudden pity for the violated veins and tissue. Tenderly I wiped the blood off my arm." (p. 105)

"I decided to go down to Columbia and score for yage. Bill Gains is squared away with Old Ike. My wife and I are separated. I am ready to move on south and look for the uncut kick that opens out instead of narrowing down like junk.

"Kick is seeing things from a special angle. Kick is momentary freedom from the claims of the aging, cautions, nagging, frightened flesh. Maybe I will find in yage what I was looking for in junk and weed and coke. Yage may be the final fix." (pp. 127-128)

Topics for Discussion

After reading the novel would you be more likely or less likely to use morphine or heroin?

Burroughs suggests in the novel that junk is something more than an inert drug—that it is alive and somehow sentient, with an individual existence lurking in the cells of old users. Do you think these statements were intended as literary devices only, or does the author really believe that junk is something mystically special?

In the author's original introduction (refer to Appendix 2) ten myths about drug use are enumerated. For example, "Addiction ruins the health and leads to early death" (p. 141). How many of these statements have you heard? Do you consider them to be myths or essentially factually correct?

Is the novel about a junky who happens to be homosexual, or about a homosexual who happens to be a junky? Discuss.

The book's original title was intended by the author to be simply 'Junk.' It was published as "Junkie: Confessions of an Unredeemed Drug Addict", then reprinted as "Junky." How might this change in title impact your assessment of the novel?

From time to time during the narrative Bill mentions his wife and children. Ordinarily, one's 'significant other' would be more significant in the plot. Discuss how Bill's unnamed wife functions within the text. Do you envy her? If you were married to a junky would you remain married through three major addiction episodes?

The novel is often considered to be largely or wholly autobiographical. Do you think that reading a novel based largely on real events is somehow fundamentally different from reading a novel that is clearly based largely on fictional events? If so, how and why?

Junky is fundamentally different from nearly all other novels by Burroughs. After reading Junky, would you be interested in pursuing other novels—however difficult—by the same author? Why or why not?