Kafka Was the Rage: A Greenwich Village Memoir Study Guide

Kafka Was the Rage: A Greenwich Village Memoir by Anatole Broyard

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Plot Summary

In his book, "Kafka Was the Rage - A Greenwich Village Memoir," author Anatole Broyard takes the reader back to his early days in the artsy neighborhood that he so idolized and adored. After returning from military service in World War II, the young twenty-three-year old Anatole was anxious to get on with his life. Although born in New Orleans, Anatole's family moved to Brooklyn when he was very young. He spent his formative years in New York and in the late 1940s, Greenwich Village was considered the place to be—it was the closest America would ever come to Paris.

The rather naïve and unsophisticated Anatole met up with an avante-garde artist, Sheri Donatti, early in his search for living quarters in the Village. When he learned that Sheri owns two apartments in her building and needed to rent one out, Anatole felt very fortunate since empty apartments were hard to come by in that neighborhood. His conservative nature and naivete prevented him from asking about their living arrangements when he saw that the apartment that was available was filled with her items. The apartment's kitchen was overpowered by a gigantic printing press—where he would live was his obvious though silent reaction. Only when he moved in and she hung his clothes in her closet was it clear that they would be cohabitating—perhaps the first official seduction via a rental transaction.

Sheri's off-beat personality and personal dogma dominated their relationship. At once, he both resented and adored her. She was elusive emotionally and unpredictable in behavior. He felt he was constantly being tested as though he didn't quite measure up to her mysterious standards. Though the pair had an intimate relationship, he never felt close to her—a state which was obviously her goal. When he finally recognized that she was not what he wanted or needed and left, she attempted various ways to lure him back. But he finally matured past the superficial attraction that she once held for him.

The obsession that he could not overcome, however, was that for the Village which, at the time, was populated with intellectuals or those who wanted to be and by artists, authors and poets or those who aspired to be. Anatole sorely wanted to be part of that scene and after parting with Sheri eventually found his own way there. He rubbed elbows with the elite and the famous and near-famous.

The young Anatole finally found his niche in that elite society but, as he comments, always kept an eye on the real world. He looked back at the poignancy and innocence of uncomplicated relationships during that period while understanding his own lack of depth in the many that proved to be unrewarding.

Chapter 1

Chapter 1 Summary and Analysis

Anatole Broyard, twenty-six, just returned from World War II. It was 1946 and it was the best time in America. The country had won a war and everything was new and promising. Anatole met Sheri Donatti who lived in an apartment in Greenwich Village. She leased a second apartment in her building that she planned to rent. It seemed perfect for Anatole—he was looking for an apartment and wanted to live in the Village.

Sheri was beautiful but not in a conventional way. Her pale blue eyes were luminescent against her pale skin and long dark hair. Her lithe, small-breasted top was supported by a much larger bottom with curvy hips and solid legs. There was something reminiscent of old-world art in her appearance which was apropos since Sheri was a budding artist. Anatole was not exactly sure what Sheri had in mind in renting the apartment to him; her speech never had intonation—a practiced quality—and her eyes never belied her intentions. Sheri's own apartment consisted of three rooms, one of which was her art studio. Anatole was very confused when he saw the second apartment. The kitchen was overwhelmed by a large printing press and the other rooms were cluttered with boxes of Sheri's possessions. He wondered where he was expected to sleep.

As was her way, Sheri offered no explanation for the state of the apartment that she had for rent. But Anatole was so anxious to live in the Village that he agreed to take it. As he said good-bye to his parents in Brooklyn, he promised to have them over when he got settled. He didn't know what the arrangement would be at the apartment. When he moved in, Sheri made room for his clothes in her closet. Only then was it clear that he would be living with her.

Anatole loved the avant-garde neighborhood in which he found himself. It was exciting and artistic. It was the closest thing America would ever have to Paris. There were novelists, poets, artists and those who wanted to be. Anatole was a conventional fellow and Sheri's very dirty apartment made him unsettled. He didn't want to clean it because it would be an affront to her housekeeping. The fact that she never wore underwear under her skirts unnerved him, always afraid the wind or a fall would expose her lack of undergarments. Sheri's lovemaking was as practiced and monotone as her speaking patterns but, as became their pattern, Anatole let her take the lead. Sheri seemed to be jealous of Anatole's book reading while he resented her art. He decided to learn more about abstract art as a way of understanding Sheri and getting closer to her. As he studied art, he learned that one could always find himself in art and that beauty existed in the most unexpected moments.

Chapter 2

Chapter 2 Summary and Analysis

Using funds from the GI Bill for tuition, Anatole enrolled in the New School for Social Research on West 12th Street. It was an exciting time for higher education—it was chic and sexy and still elitist. The New School was known as the "University in Exile" as many of its professors had fled from Europe to escape Hitler and Nazism. The atmosphere created by these displaced, often bitter, professors could be summed up with the phrase "what's wrong;" what's wrong with the government, with the family, with one's dreams and aspirations and in fact with man himself. America had won the war but was beset with guilt and nothing the professors would say was considered over the top.

In a psychology class given by Erich Fromm, famed psychologist, the students were scolded for not accepting the anguish of freedom. The intimidated class took its lashing willingly from Fromm. Fromm was an opponent of pointlessness which he considered an apt description of the lives of most Americans. Anatole also studied Gestalt psychology which left him unfulfilled and disappointed due to its lack of depth and substance. He learned from Karen Horney, a Freudian revisionist, that neurotic people were healthier than the so-called normal person because they "protested." Neurotics were in vogue at the time. Horney became enraged when a woman attending her lecture asked her about penis envy. Thinking about the class later, Anatole realized that Sheri had a penis—she owned his.

Chapter 3

Chapter 3 Summary and Analysis

Dick Gilman visited Sheri and Anatole one night and explained that he, Anatole, was completely wrong for Sheri and that he, Gilman, was the right man for her. Anatole was stunned—Dick was a friend of his. Dick had an obsessive personality—when he loved an author, he became that author. That evening, Dick was D. H. Lawrence and was ready to steal "Frieda" away. As he presented the case that Anatole was not serious enough for Sheri and did not possess the appropriate sensibilities for her, he paced back and forth in the small kitchen. He must have been reading Nietzsche who had commented that the best thoughts come while walking. Anatole thought of punching him, but Dick's presentation was so professional and provocative that the situation seemed more like a seminar—where people aren't generally punched. Anatole was so impressed with Dick's words, that he began to agree with him. But Anatole wasn't about to give up Sheri—he would change and give her all the things that Dick claimed he was incapable of giving.

When Spanish artist Nemiceio Zanarte came by and presented the same argument several weeks later, Anatole felt he was being persecuted. Zanarte begged Anatole to give Sheri her freedom—Anatole and Sheri lacked symmetry. Zanarte was not fluent in English and a few Spanish phrases began to emerge in his diatribe. When Anatole responded in Spanish, Zanarte was totally disarmed. It became apparent to Anatole that Sheri had put Zanarte up to the little drama. After Zanarte departed, an angered Anatole refused Sheri's advances for all of five minutes.

Chapter 4

Chapter 4 Summary and Analysis

A month after moving in with Sheri, Anatole bought a second-hand bookstore. It had been his dream since his days overseas. He had sold some of his GI long-johns to the Japanese who were desperate for warm clothing and had made quite a killing. He bought out an old Italian junk dealer for $300, with the caveat that he'd move all the junk out. The year, 1946, was a perfect time to open a bookstore. People were hungry for books—many had missed reading them during the war years. Books provided people with identities and the opportunities to live beyond their mundane lives. People not only revered the books they read, they became them.

In his favorite authors, Anatole felt he had inherited a new set of uncles—but uncles of rather questionable backgrounds. They were scandalous and exciting and the black sheep of the family. Books were the obsession of young men in those years much as drugs were to men of the sixties. Books kept the lives of Anatole and his contemporaries from being totally overwhelmed by sex and the pursuit of it.

Once he opened his bookstore, he was put off by some of his customers who wanted to share stories of their lives, which were often embellished if not compete fiction. Other customers were desolate people—not lovers of literature—who looked at bookshops as the last stop in salvaging their pathetic lives. As he'd listen to their sad tales, he felt as if life was conquering literature, when it should be the other way around.

Chapters 5 and 6

Chapters 5 and 6 Summary and Analysis

Chapter 5

Sheri took Anatole to visit author Anais Nin, who considered Sheri one of her disciples. Nin had once lived in France with Henry Miller and had trained in psychoanalysis under Otto Rank. She had the appeal of movie stars in old black and white films with her penciled eyebrows and taut face. Nin had an indisputable appeal, an aura about her. She spoke as she wrote, in a lyrical but careful sense that lacked spontaneity. Her domineering presence caused the conversation to be stilted and finally stalled which she resolved by offering wine to her guests. Unfortunately, when Anatole was handed the bottle to uncork it, he was an utter failure. Nin handed him another corkscrew for a second chance to humiliate himself. He failed again after which Nin took the bottle back and placed in on the table as if she never meant to open it any way. Nin described Anatole in her dairy as handsome and sensual. He was not flattered, since she described all young men in the same way.

Chapter 6

Living with Sheri was like living in a foreign country—one in which you never quite learn the language and thus never feel you belong. One night, in the dark in bed, Sheri told Anatole that she had a bad heart. He hesitated in responding—did she mean figuratively or literally? She so often talked in metaphors. He first wondered not about the statement itself but what was behind it. The doctor [what doctor, he thought] told her not to exert herself—climbing stairs was a risk. Anatole became Sheri's porter, carrying everything upstairs for her—even carrying her sometimes. Artists they visited, many of whom lived in loft apartments on the top floors of very tall buildings, wondered why Anatole was carrying her as if it was his bizarre demand. Carrying Sheri was not without its rewards—Anatole felt more in control of Sheri when she was in his arms. Due to her "condition," Anatole was careful, almost stealth, in their lovemaking.

Chapter 7

Chapter 7 Summary and Analysis

Anatole decided to enter into psychoanalysis—it was in vogue, everyone seemed to wind up there inevitably. Though he was happy, he distrusted that it would last so analysis seemed necessary. Yet, when he really faced reality, there was an unrest somewhere deep within him. On speaking with Erich Fromm, he was recommended to see Ernest Schachtel who also taught at the New School. Anatole was nervous with Dr. Schachtel who avoided looking directly at him. Anatole was concerned with pleasing the doctor and not boring him.

There was a break-through during his second visit to Schachtel. The doctor was visibly upset that Anatole was twenty minutes late. Although he didn't tell the doctor, his late arrival was due to Sheri who lured him to bed so he would have a vivid image of her to talk about at his session. There wasn't much progress during this short session with Schachtel, but on departing he blurted out that he was disappointed in love. On his third visit, Anatole tried to take back that statement but Schachtel didn't allow it. Why, he asked, was he disappointed in love. Anatole offered that although he'd been transfigured by love, it hadn't lived up to its publicity. Anatole had eleven sessions with Dr. Schachtel. Not much progress was realized because Anatole could never fully allow himself to remove his defenses. He wanted an intellectual exchange with the doctor and to stay on an even keel with him. He did not want to reveal the fragile set of fictions he had created about himself.

Chapters 8 and 9

Chapters 8 and 9 Summary and Analysis

Chapter 8

Anatole was mystified by Sheri's strange scream one night during lovemaking. She had never screamed before. He asked if there was something wrong, but Sheri didn't approve of questions. He continued his lovemaking and she screamed again—but the scream was detached from the rest of her face which was calm and placid. Where did that scream come from?

Chapter 9

Anatole and most other students in the class, approached Meyer Schapiro's art class with the same fervency as students did some twenty years later when they traveled to India to seek truth and meaning. Living with Sheri sparked Anatole's interest in modern art but yet made him feel shut off from it. It was speculation that Schapiro was not as much a fan of modern art as he was of the debate that accompanied it. As he was lecturing, Schapiro at times became so passionate that he seemed almost insane. It seemed he talked to the paintings more than to the students. The classes were so in awe of Schapiro that they were even hesitant to laugh at his jokes in case they weren't meant to hear them. On one occasion, Sheri and Anatole were so stimulated by Schapiro's lecture on Picasso that they ran to the roof of the school and made love in the dusky sundown that was painted in a perfect Picasso purple.

Chapter 10

Chapter 10 Summary and Analysis

Sex with Sheri never became a truly intimate, honest experience. Rather, it was, to Sheri, an exploration of self. She could not really use the act as a way to grow closer to Anatole—her goal was to find herself and meet Anatole on her terms. In reality, they both hated each other. He thought she was weird while she thought he was ordinary. Sheri held herself remote and, out of anxiety, Anatole chased her like the elusive hat in the wind. At times, Anatole would feel like they were becoming a couple but Sheri would soon dash those thoughts.

One night Anatole woke up in the middle of the night. Sheri, who usually slept almost on top of him, was missing. He noticed a strange smell but couldn't identify it. He followed a light to the kitchen where he found the naked Sheri, sitting in a chair with her head resting on the stove, breathing in the pure gas that she had obviously turned on. Since things involving Sheri never were what they seemed, he initially tried to determine what "message" she was sending. However, once he became faint from the smell, he turned off the gas, opened the windows and took her back to bed. Anatole knew that it was time to leave her.

Chapter 11

Chapter 11 Summary and Analysis

When Anatole left Sheri, he had to return home to Brooklyn. Apartments were difficult to find but going back to Brooklyn reminded him of those novels he hated where characters shuttled back and forth in time. He had only been with Sheri for three months, but his taste of the city would never allow him to leave permanently. Anatole closed his bookshop—it reminded him too much of Sheri. He diligently looked for an apartment while he entered into other work. His friend, Milton Klonsky, asked Anatole to collaborate on a magazine piece on jazz music.

Anatole was still attending the New School, attending classes several nights a week. One night after class, Anatole went home to find Sheri practically sitting on his mother's lap in a lounge chair, together looking at family albums. Anatole was uncomfortable but felt powerless—he just had to let whatever was going on play out. Because Sheri talked so strangely, Anatole's mother slowed her speech obviously thinking that Sheri was foreign. After hearing cute baby and childhood stories about Anatole, Sheri's face reflected her growing boredom. Sheri pulled the lever on the chair she shared with his mother and they both flew back in a horizontal position. Fearing that his father, who was sitting directly across from Sheri and his mother, would see that Sheri was wearing no underwear, Anatole rose quickly and pulled her off the chair. He took Sheri's surprise visit as a shot across the bow—he'd have to do what she wanted or else she'd expose his parents to more than her naked bottom. Anatole went home with Sheri that night but he knew he'd be leaving her again.

Chapter 12

Chapter 12 Summary and Analysis

Anatole found an apartment on Prince Street in the Village. For the first few days, he was exhilarated but then loneliness quickly set in. There was a kind of national loneliness after the war. While the war was raging, everyone was too busy to be lonely. Anatole wondered for a short time if Sheri would be better than loneliness but he reminded himself that he had been lonely with her. He stopped by Sheri's apartment when he knew she wouldn't be there. He had left some clothes and books behind. Anatole looked through her paintings finding the one that she had given him. It was an abstract, of course, and though it had little meaning to him, he decided to take it. When she first finished it, he asked her what it meant to her. She replied that he'd never be a man until he could live without explanations.

Anatole was having a difficult time adjusting to his apartment. He would have liked to invite someone over but didn't really know anyone other than Sheri. One evening there was a knock on the door. He thought it might be Sheri but instead it was a police detective who told him he must come down to the station. When the cop told him to bring the painting, it dawned on him that Sheri must have reported to the police that he stole the painting. At the station, Detective Scanlon confirmed that she had reported his theft of the piece. Anatole explained that Sheri had given it to him. Although Anatole, now angered, told Scanlon that he planned on keeping the painting because it was his, the detective finally convinced him that it wasn't worth it to be charged. Anatole left the painting with the detective.

Chapter 13

Chapter 13 Summary and Analysis

Anatole's friend, Saul Silverman, was a great talker. There were a lot of great talkers in the Village, but Saul was one of the best. Anatole compared him to the Jewish boys with whom he went to school as a youngster. They were brooding and thoughtful and had an edge on everyone in intelligence and ability. In New York in the twenties, ethnic differences weren't ignored but were devoid of negativity. Anatole, who grew up Catholic, never felt he was anti-Semitic even though he noticed differences between him and his Jewish classmates. Saul was a romantic intellect—he didn't want to change people's politics, he wanted to change their sensibilities.

Although Saul was a good friend, there was a lot he didn't know about him. Saul was in the war but Anatole didn't know what he did. He had an apartment, but he had never invited Anatole there. At the time Saul became ill, he was a literary critic for The New Leader. At first Saul thought he had the flu but when his fatigue persisted, hospital tests revealed that he had what Saul initially characterized as a "high serious" condition. His mother was deluded, thinking that his condition was due to stress. She said told Anatole that Saul "thinks too much."

One afternoon, Anatole and Saul took a walk to Prospect Park. Saul's mother was afraid he would tire himself but Saul ignored her concerns. They reminisced about the park—both had played there as young boys. When they were leaving the park, Saul took a long look around and commented that he wouldn't be back there again—he had leukemia. He prefaced his announcement by asking Anatole to enter a non-fussing pact with him. Saul asked Anatole not to patronize him, not to speak in a hushed voice. Anatole insisted that the diagnosis could be wrong and that if he did indeed have leukemia, there were cures—it wasn't the Middle Ages. Anatole held on to some hope that Saul could pull through but within days after their walk in the park, Saul was hospitalized and soon died.

Chapter 14

Chapter 14 Summary and Analysis

Anatole became acquainted with Delmore Schwartz when had accepted a piece Anatole had written for Partisan Magazine. Although he admired Delmore's intellectualism and love of the literary, it was almost as though his head was so wrapped up in books that he was unable to accept the raw data of reality. He saw the large, looking past the small. Although Anatole aspired to be an intellectual, when he read a book, he made sure he kept an eye on the real world.

Anatole told Delmore and two other colleagues about a night he witnessed a murder in Spanish Harlem. When Pablito, a ticket taker, would not allow a man in who hadn't paid, the man pulled a switchblade on him. Pablito was suddenly missing from his post and the rumor spread like wildfire that this man had killed him. Friends of Pablito sought out the stranger and murdered him with no questions asked. Pablito soon reappeared with just a scrape on his head. No one cared that the man was dead, even the police. Pablito was honored that his friends thought so much of him. Anatole could see Hemingway or Mailer writing the story but probably both would miss the heart of the story. Intrigued, Delmore and the others wants to visit Spanish Harlem so they all jumped in a cab and headed to the Park Plaza, the hotspot of Spanish Harlem. Delmore and the other companions were awed by how well everyone could dance. Delmore had a look on his face that seemed to say "so this is what real life is."

Anatole was attracted to Carmen, who was the best dancer at the Park Plaza. He fantasized about dancing with her and how it would lead to a sexual encounter. But she intimidated him and he was satisfied to keep her as a fantasy. One night, even though he was with another woman, Carmen asked him to dance. After at first claiming he couldn't dance with her because she was so much better, he gave in to her invitation. They only danced for a few moments when Carmen suggested they go to Anatole's apartment. When they arrived, she immediately stripped down. But as it turned out, sex with her was not exciting since she tended to choreograph every move. Anatole could hardly get rid of her after that. He had wanted to be part of the world he thought she was in and she wanted to be part of his. It just didn't work out.

Chapters 15 and 16

Chapters 15 and 16 Summary and Analysis

Chapter 15

Anatole was at a party given by Greenwich Village celebrity Maya Deren who had just returned from Haiti. She was demonstrating some of the dances she learned there and dancing alongside of her was Caitlin Thomas, wife of the famed Welsh poet Dylan Thomas. Dylan was in the other room, surrounded by a group of hero worshipers. Reportedly he wasn't one for dancing or small talk or American parties for that matter.

Soon things got out of hand and Caitlin starting fighting and throwing things. Dylan interceded and flung her in the bedroom and sat on her to restrain her. Maya asked Anatole to take over for Dylan who was exhausted from the struggle. Anatole sat on top of Caitlin who asked him to make love to her. He wasn't sure if she was drunk or sober but he had absolutely no interest in the bard's woman. He was given the job of taking her to her hotel. She invited him in for a drink but after he deposited her in her room, he politely declined and ran all the way down the stairs. He couldn't get away fast enough!

Chapter 16

Delmore asked Anatole to accompany him to Brooks Brothers and help him decide which new suit to buy. On the way over, he told an outrageous story about a mutual friend of theirs, Milton Klonsky. Anatole took the story with a grain of salt since Delmore was known to embellish stories and in fact even inject a measure of malice in some of his tales. Delmore trusted Anatole's judgment because he was always honest, unlike many of his other friends.

Chapter 17 and Postscript

Chapter 17 and Postscript Summary and Analysis

Chapter 17

After Sheri, Anatole had hoped for a normal relationship. Sexual mores in 1947 were quite conservative—characters in movies who had extramarital affairs had to be punished. Lady Chatterley's Lover and the Tropic of Capricorn were banned. But sex was exciting then—because it was taboo, rare and revered. The upper middle-class girls who were in Anatole's circle were raised by the novels of George Eliot and Virginia Woolf. Sex was the last thing this kind of girl gave a man. Anatole, like many young men his age, had not learned how to be friends with girls. Once he did reach physical intimacy with a girl, he became bored with the girl when they weren't engaged in lovemaking. He hadn't matured enough to have a meaningful relationship with a girl—he was acting, not allowing his true self to be revealed.

Girls wanted more than just the sexual act, or at least a promise of more. Seduction was a touching and beautiful thing—but a true and deep love was something different. Most often sincerity on the man's part was fleeting. There was an awkwardness about the whole ceremony of undressing, some girls apologizing for being too thin or too fat. It was always the girl who was on the defensive, hoping she hadn't let the guy down for not being perfect. To Anatole it was charming and innocent. Men and women had not learned how to talk to one another in those days. Women were reticent, always waiting to be asked out, to be told if the relationship was on or off. Looking back, Anatole recognized that he had been looking for too much in each girl and the girls he knew were looking for something that wasn't there in him. Perhaps they had all confused sex with the romanticism of literature.

Postscript

Anatole Broyard died before he finished this book. He wanted the death of his father to be the last part of it; so in that sense, it remains incomplete. His wife, Alexandra Broyard, helped to bring the book together. It was her opinion that Anatole found himself after becoming a father and in succeeding in a satisfying career as a literary critic for The New York Times. Mrs. Broyard felt certain that Anatole's spirit was with her in her efforts and that he was an active collaborator.

Characters

Anatole Broyard

Anatole Broyard, who eventually became a literary critic for The New York Times, reflects back on his life as a young man just returning from military service in World War II. Broyard's parents lived in Brooklyn but that wasn't the part of New York where Anatole Broyard was determined to live. Broyard had set his sights on the much more sophisticated and elite neighborhood of Greenwich Village.

Throughout Broyard's life, it was obvious from a very young age that he was captivated by literature. Some of his contemporaries were so rapt in their book reading that they literally transformed into the authors or the characters about whom they wrote . Broyard even considered some of the great authors as his uncles, albeit the black sheep of the family sort of relatives. Shortly after moving to the Village, he opened a second-hand bookstore which he stocked with the writers who at were in demand by the intellectuals who inhabited the community—authors such as D. H. Lawrence, Christopher Caudwell, Nathanael West and of course, Kafka was the rage.

Broyard reflects back on his brief though eventful relationship with a rather strange woman, Sheri Donatti, who was an abstract artist. He was impressed with her artistry and with her unique personality and view of life. His captivation quickly faded and as a measure of maturity and realism set in, he realized that Sheri was not the woman for him. Broyard moved on to become a fixture in the intellectual and literary scene of the Village. He looked back on the time with poignancy and the understanding that the Village was, in fact, not the answer to all problems.

Sheri Donatti

When Anatole Broyard first came to Greenwich Village seeking a place to live, he became acquainted with Sheri Donatti. Sheri was an abstract artist who lived in an apartment building in the Village and owned a second apartment in the same building. It was perfect, Broyard needed a place to live and Sheri needed to rent her place. Upon seeing the apartment that was for rent, he realized that something was amiss since it was jammed with her possessions—which she failed to explain. Only after he moved in did he realize that they were cohabitating.

Sheri, very appropriately for an artist, looked like a Renaissance painting with her alabaster skin, pale blue eyes and long dark hair. The top portion of her body was small and fragile while her hips and legs were disproportionately large. Sheri had a practiced, stilted way of speaking, so unusual and pronounced that when Broyard's mother met her she slowed her speech obviously convinced that Sheri was foreign. There was a strange allure about Sheri and for a while Broyard was captivated by her elusiveness and mystery. Although she and Broyard had an intimate relationship, she maintained

her mystique and prevented any genuine relationship from developing. Sheri did not like to explain her behavior or her thoughts or reactions. When Broyard asked her what was on her mind when she painted an abstract in his honor, she told him he'd never become a man if he always needed explanations.

There were many things that the fundamentally conservative Broyard found difficult to ignore—Sheri never wore any underwear and she never cleaned her apartment. After getting past his fascination with Sheri's strange persona, Broyard left her and moved on for the chance for more rewarding relationships. Her dissatisfaction with his abandonment was seen in her surprise visit to his parents whom she did not know and her report to the police that he "stole" the painting she had given him.

W. H. Auden

W. H. Auden, the poet, was a neighbor of Broyard's when he lived with Sheri Donatti in Greenwich Village.

Erich Fromm

The famous psychoanalyst Erich Fromm was a transplant from Germany during World War II. Fromm was one of Anatole's professors at the New School. Fromm thought that most Americans led pointless lives.

Dick Gilman

One evening Dick Gilman visited Anatole and Sheri. He made the case that Anatole was not the right match for Sheri—he didn't have the appropriate sensibilities. Other the other hand, Dick told the pair that he himself was the right match for Sheri.

Dylan Thomas

One evening at a party in Greenwich Village, the famous poet Dylan Thomas and his wife, Caitlin, were among the guests. Caitlin was drunk and started a fight. Dylan flung her on the bed and sat on her in order to restrain her.

Saul Silverman

Anatole's close friend Saul Silverman was what Anatole considered one of the best talkers in the Village. He was a romantic intellectual—he didn't want to change anyone's politics; rather, he wanted to change their sensibilities. Saul died in his early twenties from leukemia.

Delmore Schwartz

Delmore Schwartz was the first editor to accept one of Anatole's literary critiques. He was a literary intellectual but was so caught up in books that he didn't know a real world was spinning out there.

Dr. Ernest Schachtel

Anatole went into analysis with Dr. Ernest Schachtel who was also a professor at the New School. Anatole had eleven sessions with Dr. Schachtel but made little progress as he was more concerned with not boring the doctor than he was about revealing his inner thoughts.

Anais Lin

Anais Lin, author and poet, was an acquaintance of Sheri Donatti. In fact, Lin considered Sheri to be one of her followers. Anatole and Sherri visited her one evening. Lin was so self-absorbed that everyone felt uncomfortable. Later she wrote in her diary that Anatole was handsome and sensual. He was not impressed or flattered because she said the same thing about all young men.

Objects/Places

New Orleans, LA

Anatole Broyard's parents were both from the French Quarter in New Orleans, LA. Anatole was born in New Orleans but the family moved before he was of school age.

Brooklyn, NY

Anatole Broyard's family moved from New Orleans, LA, to Brooklyn, New York. Anatole attended school in Brooklyn and lived there until he was drafted during World War II.

Greenwich Village

Broyard lived in Greenwich Village when he returned from military service in the late 1940s. He loved the community and living among the intellectuals and artists who lived there.

Twenty-Three Jones Street

When Broyard first moved to Greenwich Village, he lived with Sheri Donatti at 23 Jones Street. She had two apartments but the one she offered to rent to Broyard was stuffed with her belongings so he had to live with her in her apartment.

Prince Street Apartment

After Broyard left Sheri Donatti, he returned to his parents' home in Brooklyn for a short time before he found his apartment on Prince Street in Greenwich Village.

Brooklyn College

Broyard attended Brooklyn College for a few semesters before he was drafted into the army during World War II.

The New School for Social Research

Anatole enrolled in the New School for Social Research on West Twelfth Street. He paid for his tuition with the GI Bill. Many of the professors there had fled Europe to escape Hitler and Nazism.

Spanish Harlem

Broyard witnessed a murder at the Park Plaza, a hotspot in Spanish Harlem. Some of his intellectual friends were intrigued by the story and insisted on visiting the "other sides of the tracks."

Partisan Magazine

The very first article that Broyard wrote was accepted for publication by the Partisan Magazine. He became friends with one of the young editors there, Delmore Schwartz.

Prospect Park

Both Broyard and his friend Saul Silverman played in Prospect Park in Brooklyn as kids. As adults, it was in Prospect Park that Saul told Broyard the tragic news that he was dying of leukemia.

Themes

The Impact of Literature in the Late 1940s

Literature was an important element of life in America following World War II. People were hungry to read books—the war years were so busy that many people were unable to read books published during those times. The works of many modern and postmodern writers were revered and sought after. It was a common occurrence for many literary intellects who inhabited the liberal community of Greenwich Village during those times to become so obsessed with authors and the characters they created that they would literally become the writer or his characters, taking on their personalities and characteristics.

Books, to these literary elitists, were everything. Books opened up new worlds and showed these intellects that there was life beyond their smug, relatively small world. Books served to ground some of these young people who were adrift without purpose or substance. Some were so caught up in their love of the fiction they read that they lost track of where the story ended and where the real world began. Some were so narrow in their world of words that it was difficult for them to deal with real situations.

Literature had an enormous impact on the sexual mores of the day. Young women looked to authors like Virginia Woolf and George Eliot for guidance. Young men expected far too much from women, basing their ideals on the works of their favorite authors. Men and women alike looked for things in their prospective partners that were not realistic expectations. They confused real intimacy and relationships with the romanticism of literature.

Sexual Mores of the Late 1940s

In the late 1940s, after World War II, society took on a conservative notion towards sexual relations. If a character in a movie committed adultery, it was a must that the character be punished for his unforgivable sin. Girls in the middle and upper classes were influenced by such authors as Virginia Woolf and George Eliot, who promoted the belief that women should have a conservative approach to sex . In fact, the girls were taught to be "hold-outs," sex was the absolute last thing that a girl should give a boy.

Young women of those times wanted the promise of more than one night in bed with a man. Young men were so driven by the desire for sex that they were willing to promise anything, even if it was not sincere and indeed very temporary. It was a cat and mouse game in which the young men were, more often than not, victorious. Women took on a much more passive, even subservient, role in intimate relationships than they do in more modern times. The man controlled calling the woman, asking her out and basically deciding whether the relationship was on or off.

When intimacy did finally occur, many young women felt unworthy of their male partner. They felt compelled to apologize for being fat or thin or for having breasts that were not the ideal. When young men did achieve the intimacy they sought, they truly felt they were fortunate. It was not rare that a young man would find that in retrospect, the pursuit was more exciting and rewarding than the actual act.

Just as Greenwich Village was a more progressive community than most others in the nation, sexual freedom—including sex with multiple partners and adultery—was far more common. In the elite and intellectual society that was the Village, conservative notions were unpopular and even rare.

Greenwich Village Culture

In the late 1940s, the Greenwich Village section of New York City was the ultimate in intellectual elitism. The community was populated with artists, poets, authors and intellectuals. The poets W. H. Auden and Anais Lin were residents of the Village. Anais Lin lived with literary giant Henry Miller at one point in her life. The famed Welsh poet Dylan Thomas and his wife were frequenters to the area. The literary enthusiasts of the Village had crushes on D. H. Lawrence, Celine, Dahlberg and Empson to name just a few. And, of course, the works by Kafka were the rage. Many of the fans of modern and post-modern authors not only loved the writing, they would, at least temporarily in their words and actions, become the author or become his characters.

Also predominant in the Village scene was the population of artists. Abstract art was extremely popular during this time and struggling artists did their best to portray their works in the abstract impressionism and cubism style of their hero Pablo Picasso. The noted art historian and professor at the New School in the village, Milton Schapiro, became so impassioned in his lectures about art that he would seem almost mad. His students would get the strong sense that he was talking more to the art than he was to them. The climate of Greenwich Village in the late '40s was a progressive, vital one that served as the backdrop for an elitist society that lured intellectuals from all parts of the world. It was viewed by some as America's best hope to have its own Paris.

Style

Perspective

"Kafka Was the Rage - A Greenwich Village Memoir" is written in the first person narrative. It is the recollections of the author's life as a young man just returning from World War II and anxious to move into the Greenwich Village scene. The author, Anatole Broyard, in later years became a literary critic for The New York Times. The only bias that could be associated with this work is that the splendor and excitement of the Village was seen through the filter of an impressionable and idealistic young man.

That Broyard was enraptured with both the Village community and scene and the popular literature and authors of the day is obvious from his emphasis and focus on these two areas. Along with being a literary critic, Broyard also authored other works including "Aroused by Books," "Men, Women and Other Anticlimaxes," and Intoxicated by My Illness." The account of this lover of literature's youthful adventures and experiences in the Village could not be better represented than it has been by his own hand. The postscript at the end by Broyard's widow explains that the book was not completed before his death. Mrs. Broyard indicated that although she helped compile the book for publication, she was sure his spirit was in on the collaboration.

Tone

Author Anatole Broyard wrote the memoir of his early years in New York's Greenwich Village with great wit, poignancy and a recognized understanding that he had lived those experiences in the community he so revered through the lens of youth and idealism. Broyard became a writer and literary critic and his recollections are presented in a form that reflects his talents. The account is not only interesting but, mirroring the ups and downs of his life, intelligent, introspective and captivating. His use of rhetorical flourishes such as the metaphor, hyperbole and personification are sprinkled throughout his work. Some examples include: He speaks of his brain having "something stuck in its teeth;" he refers to lonely bookstore patrons looking through the shelves like those reading "names on a war memorial" hoping not to find their names; he speaks of loneliness not so much a temporary condition but as a fate.

The memoir is a love story but not in the usual sense; rather, it is the tale of a young man in love with love, in love with a fresh start, in love with literature and most of all, in love with Greenwich Village. As the saying goes, Anatole was "looking for love in all the wrong places" during his affair with Sheri. His love and respect for literature is obvious on several levels. Anatole and his peers were obsessed with sex and literature—with the emphasis on literature. When he opened a second-hand bookstore, he was besieged with requests from his friends to stock it with their favorite authors who, in the Village, were considered as important and vital as air. Most of all, Anatole leaves no

doubt that his greatest passion was for the Village itself—the community of elitists, intellectuals and artists of which he had longed to be part.

Structure

"Kafka Was the Rage - A Greenwich Village Memoir" by Anatole Broyard is comprised of seventeen chapters followed by a postscript which is written by Broyard's widow. In the postscript, Mrs. Broyard explains that the book was published incomplete because it was the wish of Broyard to conclude the book with a chapter about the death of his father. However, Anatole Broyard passed away before he could write that last chapter.

The book covers Anatole's life during the late 1940s after he returned from military service in World War II. The story progresses from post-war times in America when the country was hopeful and the feeling of starting anew was everywhere—including Greenwich Village, a community of which Broyard was anxious to become a part.

The book is segmented into two main parts: "Part I, Sheri" covers his relationship with a strange, avante-garde abstract painter, Sheri Donatti, with whom he lived for several months when he first moved to the Village. Reflecting back on this time period, Broyard expresses his fascination with all things Greenwich Village. His youthful exuberance and idol worship of the artists and intellects who lived in the area were tempered by his unfulfilling relationship with Sheri.

"Part II, After Sheri," is obviously his youthful years after he ended his unrewarding relationship with Sheri. In this portion of the book, Anatole becomes part of the scene but this time by his own design. He finds his niche and rubs elbows with the elites and the pretenders, all the time keeping an eye on the real world.

Quotes

"Sheri Donatti had the kind of personality that was just coming into vogue in Greenwich Village in 1946. This was a time when Kafka was the rage, as were the Abstract Expressionists and revisionism in psychoanalysis." (Chapter 1, page 3)

"I thought all character was a form of shabbiness, a wearing away of surfaces. I saw this shabbiness as our version of ruins, the relic of a short history. The sadness of the buildings was literature—I was twenty-six, and sadness was a stimulant, even an aphrodisiac." (Chapter 1, page 8)

"To open a bookshop is one of the persistent romances, like living off the land or sailing around the world." (Chapter 4, page 28)

"Living with Sheri was a process of continual adjustment. It was like living in a foreign city: You learn the language, the currency, the style of the people. . .still, you never succeed in feeling at home. You remain a visitor, perhaps only a tourist." (Chapter 6, page 40)

"It's not so much to ask, I said. I just want love to live up to its publicity." (Chapter 7, page 51)

"My family had been neither religious nor cultivated and, coming from New Orleans, we had always been outsiders in New York. At Brooklyn College, everyone had been a Communist but me." (Chapter 9, page 56)

"They [Anatole's parents] understood that I needed an apartment of my own—I was a veteran now. I don't know what the word meant to them, but they used it all the time. They were forever saying, 'You're a veteran now,' as if that explained everything, as if I had been killed in the war and this veteran had come back in my place." (Chapter 11, page 68)

"I hadn't yet realized that loneliness was not so much a feeling as a fate. It was loneliness that walked the streets of the Village and filled the bars, loneliness that made it seem such a lively place." (Chapter 12, page 80)

"She had an interminable list of the things she would do, and none of them interested me. What I had wanted was to cross over into her world, and what she wanted was to enter mine." (Chapter 14, page 121)

"When Delmore described anyone, they regressed; they lost their saving graces, their scruples and hesitations. . . .His favorite trick was to take away their irony and leave them exposed—he was like the grammar-school bully who rips open your fly buttons." (Chapter 16, page 129)

"To someone who hasn't lived through it, it's almost impossible to describe the sexual atmosphere of 1947. . . Like visiting a medieval town in France. . .You can see the

houses and the cathedral, the twisting streets, you can read about the kind of work they did, the food they ate, or about their religion, but you can't imagine how they felt, you can't grasp the actual terms of their consciousness." (Chapter 17, page 133)

"The energy of unspent desire, of looking forward to sex, was an immense current running through American life. . . .The force of it would have been enough to send a million rockets to the moon. While sex was almost always disappointing in retrospect, the promise of it ennobled and abstracted us; it made us pensive." (Chapter 17, page 137)

Topics for Discussion

Why did Anatole seem so dependent on Sheri? What hold did she have on him? What was the basis of their relationship? What were their true feelings for one another?

How was Anatole able to afford to buy a used bookstore? What did the bookstore mean to him? What was his view of some of his customers? How could his attitude toward some customers be characterized?

What role did literature play in Anatole Broyard's story about his early years in Greenwich Village? How did some of his contemporaries react to the books they read? Why was literature important to Americans after the war?

What was the origin of many of the professors at the New School? Why was the school called "The University in Exile?" Why were so many of the students intimidated by the professors?

What authors influenced the behavior of young, upper-class women in the late 1940s? What innocence did Anatole find in relationships during those days? How were those relationships shallow and unfulfilling?

What was the subtext of Sheri's surprise visit to Anatole's parents; of her announcement that she had a bad heart; of her attempted suicide; and, of her report to the police that Anatole was a thief?

Why were Anatole and some of the literary intellectuals who were his contemporaries attracted to Spanish Harlem? What incident occurring there was intriguing to Anatole? How did the culture of Spanish Harlem contrast to that of Greenwich Village?