

The Killer Inside Me Study Guide

The Killer Inside Me by James Thompson

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Plot Summary

Lou Ford first sets eyes on a bum outside the local diner. A deputy, Lou says that he does not believe in force and does not carry a gun or even a nightstick. When the bum sizes Lou up as an easy mark, Lou crushes out a cigar in the man's hand, sending him scurrying out of town. When Lou is later sent to confront a prostitute, he is given the discretion by his superior, Sheriff Bob Maples, whether to run the woman out of town or to simply tell her to stop her trade. When Lou arrives, the woman—Joyce Lakeland—mistakes him for a customer and sends him to the bedroom. There, he finds a gun and when she returns, shows his badge which prompts her to lash out at him. He brutally beats her and at the end of the beating they have sex. This begins a relationship between the two that lasts for some time and includes brutal encounters similar to the first. Meanwhile, Lou is involved with a young woman named Amy Stanton and it is generally accepted that the two will someday marry. Amy is growing impatient and pushes Lou but he says that he is not ready for marriage.

Lou is no stranger to brutality and is caught by his adoptive brother, Mike, in the act of raping a two-year-old girl. When Mike is accused by the child for the crime, he accepts the punishment for Lou and does time in jail for the crime. When Mike returns to town after serving his jail time, Lou's father helps secure him a position as a building inspector. Mike dies later in what is officially ruled an accident but Lou believes that Chester Conway, an important building contractor of the region, is behind Mike's death. Lou vows revenge but the vow remains on the back burner as years pass.

Lou devises a plan to get even with Chester Conway through his son, Elmer, who is also seeing Joyce Lakeland. Lou arranges for Joyce to ask Chester for a bribe, promising that she will leave town if he pays up, thereby leaving Elmer alone. Elmer plans to leave town with Joyce. In reality, Lou plans to kill them both, eliminating Joyce from his life while getting revenge on Chester. He shoots and kills Elmer, making it look like Joyce pulled the trigger, and beats Joyce. She survives though he is told that she dies later in the hospital.

Lou then sets about trying to kill Amy but is starting to have some people look to him as a suspect in the murders of Joyce and Elmer. The bum that Lou burned shows up about this time, telling Lou that he saw him at the Lakeland home on the night of the murders. Lou pretends to agree to pay a bribe to keep the bum quiet but actually sets the stage to make it appear that the man has killed Amy. He does this, beating Amy to death and causing the bum's death at the hands of police, but is suspected in those murders as well. Faced with inevitable arrest, Lou learns that Joyce is not dead—as he has known all along to be the case—and manages to kill her just before dying himself.



Chapters One through Six

Chapters One through Six Summary

Lou Fields has finished a piece of pie at the local diner when he first sees the bum peering in through the window. The waitress is amazed when she notices that Lou, a deputy sheriff, is not carrying either a gun or a nightstick but he says that he does not need either. In chapter two, Lou has been sent by Sheriff Bob Maple to the home of Joyce Lakeland on Derricks Road, just past the Branch place, because of some complaints that the woman is a prostitute. Bob tells Lou to do whatever he feels right about the situation and promises to back him. When Lou arrives, the woman mistakenly thinks he is there for sex and invites him to the bedroom. Lou goes there and finds a gun in an open dresser drawer while he waits. When she returns, he shows her his badge and she begins to cuss him, eventually kicking and hitting him. Lou eventually loses control, grabs her and throws her on the bed, then beats her with his belt. When he manages to stop, she pulls him closer, kisses him and they have sex. Lou then goes back to her house, over and over, and says that he has begun thinking of a way to "settle an old score" with Chester Conway, owner of Conway Construction Company.

The scene then changes to the point at which Lou is leaving the diner. He grabs the bum and grinds out his lit cigar in the man's hand. The man is angry and says that Lou should "watch that stuff" as he walks away. In chapter three, Lou goes to the Central City Labor Temple where he plans to meet Joe Rothman, a labor union official who questions Lou about the death of Lou's adoptive brother, Mike Dean. Over the course of the questions, it is revealed that Mike was adopted by Lou's father, a town doctor, after his own parents died, that Mike was six and Lou four, and that Lou is convinced that Mike was innocent of the crime he was accused of—raping a two-year-old girl as well as "some other cases." What Lou does not say aloud is that he knows Mike is not guilty because Lou is. Lou says that both he and his father wanted Mike to return to Central City but does not say aloud that his father had wanted Mike to watch over Lou. It is then revealed that Mike fell on a construction site and was killed, and that some believe Mike was pushed and that Chester Conway was behind the murder. Lou says that he does not believe Conway was behind it.

In chapter four, Lou returns to his house. He says that it was once his father's office. He parks in the building that was once a barn—the place where Mike had discovered Lou "with" the little girl. Lou says that he sometimes believes he might have made the conscious decision to remain in this house as a means of punishing himself. Lou's father had plans for Lou, his only biological son, to become a doctor but had been afraid to allow Lou to go away to school. Lou's father arranged for Lou to have the job as a deputy. Lou is startled to find Amy Stanton, his long-time girlfriend and lover, waiting inside for him. Lou says that they had never made any conscious decision to connect, but that it had happened. On this particular night, Amy says she believes it is time for them to marry. Lou says it would limit his options, that he does not want to always be a deputy, and prompts Amy to laugh at the thought that he might want to be a doctor. Amy



then tells Lou that she is pregnant and he says that she cannot be because his father had performed a vasectomy on him years before. Amy is not upset that Lou caught her in a lie and he says he cannot "back up" on his own story or she will know that he had lied as well. They argue about whether Lou ever plans to marry her and part with Amy exacting a promise that they'll talk about the situation on Sunday.

In chapter five, the sheriff's deputies are kept busy and when Lou has time to consider the situation with Amy he knows that he will not marry her. The following morning, Chester Conway arrives and tells Lou that he needs to handle an upcoming situation. In chapter six, the situation, as it is revealed, is that Chester is paying off Joyce Lakeland to leave town because Chester's son, Elmer, is involved with the woman. Lou and Joyce have instead planned that Joyce will leave town with Elmer and the money Chester is giving her and that Lou will meet up with her later. Lou arrives at the Branch farm, on the road near Joyce's house, and pokes a hole in his tire so that he has a flat. He then jacks the car up a bit and walks to Joyce's. There, he lets her entice him into having sex only after he learns that she is going to take a bath as well. Then he beats her brutally and leaves her in the living room for dead while he waits for Elmer. When Elmer arrives, Lou tells him that Joyce is waiting and when Elmer discovers the body he immediately touches her, smearing her blood on his own face. Lou then shoots him with Joyce's gun and leaves the house, fixing his flat and heading for home. On the way, he meets Chester who demands that Lou go back to Joyce's house with him, saying that Elmer is not yet home. Lou tries to stall Chester but he refuses. Chester arrives first and is on the phone when Lou comes in the door. Lou hears Chester say that Elmer is dead and that he is not going "to let her die," indicating that Joyce is still alive. Chester says that Joyce has to "burn" for killing Elmer.

Chapters One through Six Analysis

Lou has a habit of dropping adages in what he calls an effort to curb his temper. He goes to great extremes with this and it clearly makes people uncomfortable after he has used several in the course of a few minutes' worth of conversation. It is never fully explained where this habit comes from but it seems to be Lou's way of seeming dull and almost unintelligent. When he has the opportunity to show his knowledge, when he is not trying to put on a show for anyone, he does not revert to the adages. He says in the first chapter that "striking at people that way is almost as good as the other, the real way." There follows one of the first points of foreshadowing in the book with Lou saying that he has tried to forget about "the real way," and that he has been successful at it with the exception of having met "her." He does not immediately identify "her" but she turns out to be Joyce Lakeland.

Rothman seems to have contacted Lou in an effort to find out whether Lou believes there was any wrongdoing in the case of Mike's death because Rothman's agency, if they knew that there had been a murder and did nothing about it, could be held liable. This will play a role in the story, but only to the point that Rothman will be among the first to openly accuse Lou of having murdered others, including Chester Conway's son,



Elmer. What is interesting about Rothman is that he tells Lou that he might as well save his country-boy routine for someone else, because Rothman is not buying it.

Amy is demanding but is also very clingy and seems to demand more because she feels she is getting cheated in her devotion to Lou. The interesting thing is that she does not at all plan to leave him and will likely continue to be dissatisfied with this relationship for the rest of her life. Lou himself believes he knows Amy but does not seem to really understand the depth of her devotion. Otherwise he would never have believed that she might tell someone details about their lives that would lead them to blame Lou for any crimes. It is interesting that Lou sparks this level of devotion without giving anything in return.

Lou's grudge against Chester is two-fold. He believes that Chester ordered Mike's murder and says that Mike's death caused his father's. Lou has come to believe that he cannot kill Chester, though it is not clear why he chooses not to consider this option. Instead, he is going to kill Chester's son, hurting Chester the way Lou's father was hurt. Chester never seems to believe that anything or anyone could go against him. What is interesting here is that Chester knows that Lou is to be at Joyce's house about the same time as Elmer and that puts him at the scene of the crime. This seems to be one of many mistakes Lou does not consider in his own belief in his superior reasoning and attention to detail.



Chapters Seven through Ten

Chapters Seven through Ten Summary

In chapter seven, Lou continues talking to the officials about the murder and his role in the situation until almost three a.m. He stops by a restaurant run by a Greek man who says that his son, Johnnie Pappas, is working at a service station called Slim Murphy's. Lou, realizing the father is worried about the son, stops by and tells the boy that fathers who worry most are those who care the most, cites the fact that the service station has a shady reputation and elicits a promise from Johnnie to stay out of trouble. At home, Amy is waiting and says that Lou never considers her feelings, citing Lou's time with Joyce Lakeland, at which Lou thinks that she just does not realize "I'm doing you a favor by not beating your head off." What he says aloud is that she is right, that he makes mistakes and he begins brutal foreplay but is unable to have sex. He tells her that it is because he has so much on his mind but she counters that she can "smell" the sex on him. She is very angry and he stops her tirade by saying that they should marry. He tells her that he did not want to be dragged into it but that he has come to think it is the right thing to do. She wants them to go back to bed together, but the phone rings and Lou says that Sheriff Maples is on his way over. Amy leaves by the back door just before the Sheriff arrives.

In chapter eight, Sheriff Maples drives while the county attorney, Howard Hendricks, rides in the back. Bob says that he hopes he has not interrupted anything and Lou says that he has already kept "her" waiting five or six hours, which prompts Howard to ask if Lou had had a date the previous night. Lou says he does not understand why it would matter but Howard says that if Lou had a date it means he had planned to be at home and provides an alibi for Lou. Howard then asks Lou who the girl is and Lou refuses to say. He is backed up by Bob who says that people are not rude about such things in Central City. Lou is then asked to explain about his flat and he says that the tire was just low when he pulled off the main road. They all laugh together and all three sit up front on the way back to town, a situation that makes Lou uncomfortable as he considers that these two men could be putting on an act the same as he is. The three arrive back in Central City and decide to go out for lunch. There, they learn that Chester has made arrangements for Joyce to go to Fort Worth for better medical treatment. Bob says that it will not make much difference and that it seems impossible that the woman will survive anyway. Bob tells Lou that the medical transport taking Joyce to the hospital will leave at ten that morning and that Bob and Lou will be accompanying the transport.

In chapter nine, Bob and Lou arrive at the airport and Lou apologizes for not having sent Joyce Lakeland out of town at the beginning rather than allowing the situation to escalate. Bob says that he does not blame Lou. At their arrival, Chester Conway demands that Lou ride with him and tells Lou that he is going to do whatever it takes to restore Elmer's reputation. Chester tells Lou that he will be in charge of questioning Joyce if she regains consciousness and tells Lou to go to their hotel, located on West Seventh Street. Bob returns to the hotel and tells Lou that Joyce has died. He then says



that he has failed Lou. Bob says that he allowed Howard to question Lou and that he knows Lou would never have done the same had Howard been questioning Bob. Bob gets very drunk and begins to ramble, saying that he wants to go with Lou around town to find something to do but Lou convinces him to lay down for a nap. Lou books a room on a train headed back to Central City and they leave town together.

In chapter ten, Bob and Lou arrive in Central City and Bob, who is obviously sick with more than just the after-effects of too much drinking, goes directly home. Lou has a phone call and it is Rothman and he says that he wants some reassurance on a specific point. Lou says that he has it, but does not elaborate. Then Rothman says that he is wondering how a woman beat as badly as Joyce had been could possibly have shot a man six times. The conversation goes on for several minutes and Rothman says that he worries that people will know—as he knows—that Lou has a motive for killing Elmer, in order to get back at his father. It is during this conversation that Lou says that what had actually happened is that he had told Chester Conway that Joyce wanted a bribe to leave town and that Lou had known that the plan was for Elmer to leave with her. He indicates that he had thought that Elmer leaving town with a known prostitute would have been a horrible blow to Chester. Rothman says that, looking at Lou and knowing him as he does, he believes Lou's story.

Lou calls Amy and asks her to come over that night, figuring that if he says he wants to see her she will not be harping on the fact that he does not want to marry her. He then goes into his father's laboratory and mixes up an injection of hormones and vitamin B so that he will not have trouble performing sex. Lou then goes to the courthouse.

Chapters Seven through Ten Analysis

Lou talks to Elmer prior to their going to Joyce Lakeland's farm house and taunts Elmer about being Chester's son. Lou says that he bets Elmer has no money of his own and that he should be willing to pay Lou for his role in helping Elmer and Joyce leave town together. Elmer reacts to the taunts by digging in his pocket and pulling out a wad of money that turns out to be five hundred dollars. Lou then looks at Elmer with an expression designed to say that he expects Lou to be a cheapskate and this look is effective because Elmer gives Lou the entire wad of money. The problem is that Lou does not think about where Elmer really did get the money and he does not seem to consider that Chester might have marked the money he is using to pay off Joyce. This will be a problem later because Lou will spend one of the twenties he gets from Elmer, which will put the police on his trail.

Lou almost immediately begins justifying his actions. He says that he is angry because the murders should not have "turned out this way," but he is not referring to the fact that one is dead and another likely to die. Instead, he is talking about the way he has gotten roped into the investigation though the officials should be thanking him for having done away with "a couple of undesirable citizens."



Lou seems amazed that he can "care" about Johnnie Pappas and his problems when he has the murders of Elmer and Joyce hanging over his head. It is not clear whether Lou really believes that he does care of if he does not realize what caring really is. While Lou is here, he gives Johnnie a twenty from the money Elmer had given him

While Lou is waiting at the hotel for word of Joyce's condition, he says that he knows that she is either already dead or will die soon. He then says something very interesting—that he will be rid of "the sickness" when she is dead. It is never really explained why he associates Joyce with his sickness but he will later reveal that she shares a likeness to both Amy Stanton and to the woman that was their housekeeper when Lou was young—he had a relationship with that woman as well.

There is a significant aspect of foreshadowing during which Lou says he knows Chester Conway has said something important to Bob and it really "frazzled" Bob. Though Bob does not tell Lou what Chester says, Lou says he should have known. Bob also tells Lou that "it's lightest just before the dawn." Lou says Bob must have gotten the old adage wrong, but Bob says he did not get it wrong. This is also a foreshadowing and Lou will later say that Bob was right on this count.



Chapters Eleven through Fifteen

Chapters Eleven through Fifteen Summary

In chapter eleven, Lou goes into Howard Hendricks' office at the courthouse and says it is too bad that the girl died. Howard says it is actually a positive thing because it means they will not have to prosecute her. Lou says there is something about the murder that is bothering him and that he wants to talk to Howard about it. Howard is somewhat impatient but agrees and Lou relates Rothman's questions, though keeping Rothman's name out of it as if Lou himself had come to wonder how Joyce could have shot Elmer when she was in such bad shape or how he could have beaten her after he had already been shot. Howard is excited, anticipating the idea of another person at the scene but when Lou says he supposes it was just a fluke that cannot really be explained, as is the case with some situations, Howard agrees that Lou is probably right. He warns Lou not to talk about it to anyone else and Lou seems to agree on the grounds that it probably is not important anyway. Lou suggests that they check into the whereabouts of Joyce's other regular customers and Howard begins to really sweat at the thought of those "well-to-do men" who would not be happy to be involved.

Lou leaves town and is several miles out Derrick Road toward Joyce's house before he remembers she is not there. He returns home and tries to read a little, noting the extensive library his father left. Lou then finds a picture of Helene, the family's housekeeper, with scars in the form of "crisscross blurs on her thighs." In chapter twelve, Lou recalls his time with Helene and her enticing him with "all the big boys do it." When Lou's father discovers his relationship, he whips Lou and sends Helene away. Lou returns to the present and receives a phone call from Howard who says Lou was right about an accomplice and Johnnie Pappas has been arrested. It is explained to Lou that Chester Conway had marked all the bills he had put in the money to be handed over to Joyce Lakeland, and that Johnnie had been caught with one of them. What the police do not know is that Elmer had had some of that money in his possession when he stopped by Lou's house and that he had given five hundred dollars of it to Lou on the night of the murders. Lou says that Elmer might have spent some of the money before he was killed but he is told that only the single twenty-dollar bill has shown up.

Lou goes into the jail and is asked by Howard Hendricks to talk to Johnnie in the hope of getting him to confess. In the jail with Johnnie, Johnnie says that he knows that Lou was the one who gave him the twenty at the service station. Johnnie seems to indicate that he believes Lou might have taken the money from Elmer in some sort of bribe. Lou asks Johnnie what he has said about it and Johnnie assures him that he has not told anyone about it, and indicates that he now believes that Lou will get him out of jail. Lou talks to Johnnie for a few minutes, reassuring him and then says that he is sorry for what he is about to do, then strikes Johnnie in the throat, killing him instantly. He then uses Johnnie's belt, hangs the boy from his bunk, and then leaves the cell, telling Howard that he should wait for awhile then send someone in to talk to him again. Lou says that he has done all he can, and that Johnnie will likely confess after he has had



some time to think about it. Lou asks that someone call him later with news of whether Johnnie talks.

In chapter thirteen, Amy is at Lou's house when he gets the call from Howard that Johnnie has committed suicide which Howard says is "better than a confession." Lou says he tells Amy what is "supposed to have happened," but does not tell her he killed Johnnie. Amy's immediate reaction is that Lou has solved the case and he might be rewarded for it.

In chapter fourteen, Lou comes down with a cold and has several days off work. When Bob Maples come by the second time to visit during Lou's illness, he asks Lou why he does not just pack up and leave town. Lou intimates that Amy would not want to leave town. Bob then seems on the verge of asking if Lou might leave town without Amy, but does not complete the thought. Amy comes to visit Lou later and says she does not understand why Chester Conway has not come to visit him after Lou has been credited with solving Elmer's murder. Lou says he does believe it is strange.

In chapter fifteen, Lou continues to be concerned about the fact that he has not seen Chester Conway. He says Bob is not any quieter than usual but Howard is acting very strangely. Lou goes to visit Johnnie's father who is remodeling his restaurant. Lou tells him he is sorry about Johnnie, that he thinks he let Johnnie down. Lou also says he does not believe any other officer was in Johnnie's cell after Lou left it, in an apparent attempt to assure Johnnie's father that Johnnie had not been murdered.

Lou drives out Derrick Road and is there when Rothman arrives. Rothman tells Lou that he does not know how the work being done at the restaurant owned by Johnnie's father is being paid for. Lou says that perhaps Johnnie's father had some money in savings or maybe could have borrowed against the property. Rothman says he does not believe that, saying Conway Construction is making payments for the work out of his own pocket. Rothman then drops the information that Johnnie could not have been involved in the murders of Elmer and Joyce because he had stolen tires from a member of the labor union that night.

Chapters Eleven through Fifteen Analysis

Lou replays the conversation he overheard between his father and the housekeeper upon his father's discovery of the sexual relationship between the housekeeper and Lou. Lou says that Helene had told his father that it should not matter to him because he had lost interest, seeming to indicate they had also had a sexual relationship. She then tells Lou's father he could have handled it better but his over-reaction was a bad decision. She finishes with an accusation that Lou's father "likes to hurt people," which could mean he had also been a masochist though it might have referred to the inflicting of emotional pain instead. It is left to the reader to interpret this statement.

Lou talks about the "odd" couples he encounters from time to time, saying that the beautiful women with the ugly men or vice versa are "tragic." He says these people had



some moment in time when they were happy together and had no problem getting past their differences. It seems possible Lou is talking about his own life and the fact that he cannot find a mate of his own. There is nothing more mentioned on this topic and it is left to the reader to determine the significance.

After Amy says Lou should be rewarded for his part in solving the murders of Elmer and Joyce, Lou says he should not be rewarded for doing his job. Amy says Lou should "be very angry" with her and this seems to be the cue for Lou to beat her as a part of their sexual relationship. This will be another of the clues that lead the police to Lou as the murderer. Lou also beats on Joyce and Howard will note that both Joyce and Amy have similar injuries after investigating both women.

Lou says the fact that he hates Amy and plans to kill her does not make him any less proud that Amy is his girlfriend. He seems proud of the fact that she is an attractive woman. Amy visits everyday while Lou is sick and he criticizes what she brings him to eat though he much later says he believes she was probably doing the best she could. Lou also reassures himself Amy knows too much about his life and would tell on him so Lou would be punished for his crimes. It is never explained what Amy knows that could be used against Lou but Amy does later write a letter that indicates she does know that Lou has done something. The problem is that Amy would never do anything to hurt Lou because her love for him is so deep.

It is left to the reader to determine the significance of Conway's involvement in the remodeling project at the restaurant owned by Johnnie's father. It seems possible Conway knows—as does Johnnie's father—that Lou is responsible for Johnnie's death and that he wants Johnnie's father to remain quiet about the situation until there is time to build the case against him and prosecute him for Elmer's murder.



Chapters Sixteen through Eighteen

Chapters Sixteen through Eighteen Summary

In chapter sixteen, Lou and Rothman continue their conversation, with Rothman saying Johnnie had sold two of the tires to another man and it proves Johnnie had not been near the place of the murders. Lou says it could be that a friend of Johnnie's had stolen the tires and given them to Johnnie. Rothman tells Lou that he really has to prepare to leave town and Lou seems to agree, though he says that he needs a couple of weeks to get his situation in order. What he does not say aloud is that he needs time to deal with Amy.

Lou is at home alone when a man arrives and it takes Lou several minutes to figure out it is the bum he burned with his cigar outside the diner. The bum tells Lou he saw Lou park his car and walk across to the farmhouse where Elmer and Joyce were murdered. The bum says he did not realize the significance at that time, but he had later come to realize he has proof of Lou's involvement. The bum tells Lou the information is bound to be valuable and Lou comes to agree though he says he must have time to get the money together. He tells the bum to return in two weeks, at nine o'clock in the evening, and he will have the five thousand dollars to pay off the bum.

Lou and Amy are talking later and he senses she has something she wants to say. He opens the conversation of marriage, which she mentions at almost exactly the same moment. Lou then tells her he wants to marry her, and he believes they should elope in about two weeks, the same length of time he has arranged for the payoff of the bum who is blackmailing him.

In chapter seventeen, a man shows up at Lou's house the Tuesday following the day Lou agrees to pay off the bum and to marry Amy. The man identifies himself as Dr. John Smith, says he was "passing through" town, and he had heard a rumor that Lou's house might be for sale. Lou tells the man there is probably no room in the town for a general practitioner, and begins a highly-technical conversation, quizzing the man on various medical beliefs and theories. Lou says he recognizes the man but it is several minutes into the conversation before he realizes who the man posing as John Smith really is. The man really had a degree from the University of Edinburgh and, according to Lou, "killed a half dozen people" with his medical practice. He had then "picked up a jerkwater Ph.D., and edged into psychiatry." Lou says the man had then been hired by a police department but then was forced to move on when he made some serious mistakes there, implicating some important people. Lou wonders only for a moment what the man is doing in his house before realizing he has been sent by the police to give an opinion on Lou. Lou is furious and tells the man he should return to those he is reporting to that he does not know enough to say anything about Lou. Lou also tells the man to take a message back to his bosses that Lou will not tolerate another such visitor. Lou says this is confirmation that the officials are "closing in" and he is under investigation. He cooks a big breakfast, eats and goes into town.



Chapter eighteen begins with the words, "I killed Amy Stanton on Saturday night, the fifth of April, 1952," and gives a brief overview of what happened before saying he is "not ready" to yet relate the story, and that "it's not necessary yet." He drops back to the time immediately after he and Amy come to the decision to marry. He says that it is a good two weeks. The two go lots of places together, spending a great deal of time enjoying themselves. Lou says nothing they do is overly exciting but that it is consistent. Their activities include a trip for ice cream and one night they watch the high school baseball team during practice time. Lou says that sometimes they simply lie together, holding each other, and that the time flies much too quickly. Lou says they have only a minor quarrel during that time but that he can see Amy is trying not to be snappish at him.

Lou says that he continues to work every day he is supposed to be on the job, though he admits that it is difficult to continue facing other people. He says that he would prefer to remain inside, but will not allow himself that luxury. Lou says his refusal to stay at home during those days is an indication that his conscience is not bothering him at all. There is an incident involving Jeff Plummer, a deputy, and Bob and Lou says that when he returns later Jeff is gone and Bob gives Lou a warrant to serve. Unlike in recent days, Bob sends Lou out alone and Lou notes that this indicates that Bob "has his neck stuck out," and he does not know whether he feels better about the situation because of that. Lou reassures himself that he has not asked anyone for friendship and it is not his fault Bob has decided to stick by him. Lou stops by Johnnie's father's restaurant often and when he learns Chester Conway is in town, Lou is waiting and inserts himself into the situation so that Chester has no option but to accept the offered ride. Lou tells Chester that he is sorry for having acted badly during the trip to Houston. Lou talks nonstop and says that when he lets Chester out at his destination—the airport—Chester hurries to the plane and does not turn back around. Lou says he had given Chester every opportunity to stop him from his intended course of action, and that Chester had not stopped him.

Lou tells Bob that he is going to have to have some time off and hints that he and Amy are getting married. Bob hesitates for a moment but then congratulates Lou. Lou goes first out Derricks Road for awhile after that conversation, then goes home and has a long bath. Shortly before nine o'clock that night, Amy arrives at Lou's house.

Chapters Sixteen through Eighteen Analysis

Lou says that he's amazed that the people he comes into contact with continue to "ask for it." This is another of Lou's continual efforts to explain his actions. He cannot possibly explain the reason he is murdering people but he tries to turn it into their fault. In the case of the bum, the man arrives just as Lou is trying to figure out a way to murder Amy, giving Lou what he believes to be a way to arrange it. Lou seems to believe that this way of murdering Amy and covering it up is a case of fate.

Lou puts his dull, country-boy act aside when he thinks he is talking to a doctor who might be interested in buying his house. He talks theory and technical information,



quizzing the doctor for opinions. It seems obvious that Lou does not really want anyone else's opinion, but he is simply relieved to be talking to someone who might understand what he is saying. He says later that it had "been good to talk" to the man, even though the man's presence turned out to be a lie. Another important aspect of this man's visit is that it seems to eliminate any doubt that Lou is being investigated for his role in the murders. Lou has, in fact, seen many signs of this but is not willing to believe it until there is irrefutable truth. However, even with this proof, he believes they have no proof and they cannot find any proof, therefore, he is safe even with officials stepping up their investigations.

It seems Lou's determination to go to work during those final two weeks is a statement to others as much as it is a last-ditch effort for Lou to keep his pride. He says he knows he is a suspect in the murder investigation, and the officials are aware that Lou knows of their investigation. Lou explains all this then says he is not afraid, and his method of proving that is to go to work, facing his accusers without flinching or showing any signs of guilt or fear. What is more, it seems Lou shows the signs of a truly pathological killer in that he really does seem to have no fear of punishment and no concern that what he has done is wrong, either morally or legally. What Lou does say is that his feelings are hurt. It seems he is more upset at the idea that someone might believe he is guilty of something than of actually being guilty.

There is a scene in which Bob and an officer, Jeff Plummer, are discussing something and Lou happens upon them without their knowledge. When this happens, Lou remains hidden and waits to see what they will say. He overhears Jeff saying he is not going to "do any spying" anymore. When Bob says that Jeff has to do what he is told in order to keep his job, Jeff says he is "glad Bob mentioned that," removes his badge and drops it on the table. This scene is never fully explained though it seems likely Bob has ordered Jeff to keep an eye on Lou and Jeff has refused to do so anymore. Jeff is a minor character but he does come to the forefront of the story later when he is guarding Lou's house on the day after Amy's murder. In that scene, he is working in his official capacity as a law enforcement officer though it is never explained how he again comes to have his job.

Lou talks nonstop to Chester Conway on the way to the airport but does not say anything that would indicate to Chester that Lou is preparing to kill Amy Stanton. Still, Lou seems to expect that Chester would have picked up on his plans somehow. He says he does not understand why no one will stop him.



Chapter Nineteen through Twenty-Six

Chapter Nineteen through Twenty-Six Summary

In chapter nineteen, Amy arrives at Lou's house shortly before nine o'clock and is immediately angry when she realizes Lou was in the house and did not come to help her with her suitcases, brought because Amy believes they are eloping that night. Lou hits her hard in the stomach, the first strike of a brutal beating. He then sits down and Amy grabs hold of his foot. He has to shake her off and notes she is clutching her purse, a point Lou believes will be good because it is typical of Amy's tendency to hold tightly to her money. The bum finally arrives. Lou shoves a wad of cash in the man's hands, knowing he will then shove it into his pocket, which he does. Lou tells the man to follow him to the back of the house where Amy is. When the bum sees Amy's body, Lou grows very angry, seeming to blame the man for Amy's death. Lou says he knows the man did not kill Amy, but that he could have except for the fact that the bum is like everyone else—too nice to have done something like this.

The bum seems to finally realize what is happening and turns to run. Lou is immediately behind him. The bum escapes the house and Lou chases him outside, yelling that the bum has murdered Amy Stanton. As they continue to run toward the downtown area, Lou sees that Jeff Plummer is in his car at the end of an intersection and Jeff gets out as the bum and Lou rush his way. Jeff gets out of his car and also yells at the man to stop. The bum continues to run though both Jeff and Lou are yelling at him to stop. Jeff shoots the bum in the leg and the bum falls, but does not stay down long. He jumps up and tries to run again, and this time he sticks his hand into his clothes. Jeff fires again and the man's head is almost gone by the time he hits the pavement. Lou drops down on top of him and starts beating on him. Lou says he is babbling about having seen the bum over Amy's body and continues to beat on the bum until someone pulls him away and takes him home.

In chapter twenty, Lou wakes up the following morning. He was drugged the previous night with morphine and washes his face, then drinks water to help erase the taste of the morphine. Lou is then surprised to find he is alone, saying it is not typical that people would have allowed the grieving fiancée time alone on the day after the brutal murder of his girlfriend. He finds Jeff Plummer on the front porch and realizes Jeff has been keeping people away. Jeff tells Lou he has been telling people that Lou is upset about Bob Maples, which prompts Lou to ask what happened to Bob. Jeff responds that Bob killed himself.

Later, Jeff and Howard Hendricks come into Lou's bedroom to talk to him. Howard tells Lou that he does not believe all the questions about the night's events and Amy's death have been answered. Howard says the man Lou says killed Amy is nothing but a common laborer. Howard dismisses each of Lou's excuses as to how he appears to have been involved. Then Howard tells Lou that a letter was found in Amy's purse. She had apparently planned to give Lou the letter while they were stopped on their way to



get married. In the letter, Amy promises she will change, that she will not be demanding and that she is "frightened and worried." She says she wants to explain to Lou that she knows there is something wrong and she wants to help him fix whatever it is, even if that means they are to be apart for awhile. She goes on to say that she loves him, always has and always will, and if he finds he cannot trust her he is free to leave her bags inside the door and to leave because she has enough money for a bus ticket home.

In chapter twenty-one, Lou says he still is not going to give up or give in. Lou continues to insist he is innocent and tells Howard there is no way that letter means Amy was afraid of him. He says Amy was not the kind of person to stick around with him if she had actually been afraid. Howard tells Lou he cannot leave town because he is suspected of murder, but Lou says that if Howard actually had any proof he would already be under arrest. Howard then tells Lou that he is coming with them and Lou refuses until Jeff pulls out his gun and points it at Lou. Lou says he knows he would not manage to refuse before Jeff would pull the trigger.

In chapter twenty-two, Lou remains in the jail cell where Johnnie died and he hears Johnnie's voice which he realizes is a recording Johnnie made on a trip. Lou says he acts as if the sound of Johnnie's voice is a problem for him, but it really is not. Lou says he knows being held is not legal but he also knows there is no doubt that the area around the courthouse is a prime place for illegal actions. Lou says he also knows they have not tried to beat him into a confession because they know it will not work. Lou says he had clues about the fact the police were closing in on him, but that he had ignored the facts that lead to this conclusion.

Lou spends some time evaluating why he had killed and he seems to have reasons that he believes justifies most, until he comes to the bum. When he fails to arrive at an immediate answer on that score, he says there are some who are killed just because they are weak and too afraid to strike out or even to strike back.

In chapter twenty-three, Lou remains in jail eight days before he is moved to an insane asylum. He is quickly in a routine that involves no opportunity for him to hurt himself. One night they turn out the lights though the lights had always been left on up to that point, and start flashing pictures of Amy on the wall. Lou says the following night, he asks if they are going to show him the pictures again. He says that night is a "bad night" and they do not show the pictures again.

Chapter twenty-four marks the arrival of Billy Bob Walker, the high-priced lawyer hired by Rothman and the labor union. Walker is loud and demanding and immediately begins yelling for Lou's release. He is soon accommodated and Lou is given his own clothes and allowed to leave with Walker. As they drive back toward Lou's house, Walker invites Lou to tell him about his situation, but urges him to say it in "hypothetical" terms. Lou then begins to relate the story of a man who has committed this series of murders though he slips occasionally from the hypothetical to first person. Walker then asks Lou what the police have on him, really seeking to find out whether Lou can be defended in court. When they arrive at Lou's house, Walker asks if he can come in but Lou declines



and Walker says that Lou is probably right. Walker then says that he had hoped to be taking Lou away but Lou says he knows he could not leave town with Walker under any circumstances.

In chapter twenty-six, Lou says he knows he has a very limited amount of time but that he cannot seem to find anything to fill it up. He makes some coffee and smokes a little, and eventually goes to his father's laboratory and finds his "emergency" stash of alcohol which he uses to create a bomb of sorts. He puts a knife up his shirt sleeve. In chapter twenty-seven, Lou looks outside to find deputies and some of Conway's employees, all armed with guns trained on the house. Lou says he wants to go out and make fun of them, but he is afraid someone will be overly trigger-happy and fears it would be something they would enjoy. Joyce Lakeland walks up to the house and tells Lou she did not tell on him. Lou says that he knew she would not but then slips the knife blade into Joyce's ribs just as the alcohol is ignited by candles. Lou says this is the end of his story unless people like him get another opportunity in another world.

Chapter Nineteen through Twenty-Six Analysis

Amy does not die immediately and lingers brutally for the entire time Lou is waiting for the bum to arrive. What is interesting is that Lou is fully aware of Amy's suffering but does not blame himself for it. In fact, he blames the bum, saying the bum is late and that means the bum is to blame for Amy's suffering. When Lou seems to hesitate over attacking the bum, he recalls it was this man who "caused" Amy's suffering, and that prompts Lou's fury. Lou continues to argue the point, mostly with himself. He says the bum could have killed Amy but the bum would not have been able. Lou also seems angry the bum seems surprised to find Amy's body in the house.

Lou says the police know enough not to try to beat a confession out of him because "you can't stamp a man's corns when he's got his feet cut off." This is an interesting analogy and it seems the message is that Lou has no conscience, therefore could not be forced into doing the right thing.

Lou mentions he is certain he is going to be rescued from jail by a high-priced lawyer hired by Rothman for Lou because of the possibility of a connection between Lou's crimes and the labor union. The storyline is somewhat complicated here and it seems a point some readers could miss.

While in jail Lou spends some time reflecting on his life and recounts the attitude of his father when he had discovered the relationship between Lou and the housekeeper. Lou says it is this reaction that makes him feel as if he has done something that can never be forgiven. Lou says he has never gotten past the woman and that every woman he has met since then is equated with her. This becomes a psychiatric diagnosis; it seems Lou has come to hate women because his first relationship put him on such bad terms with his father. Lou says he kills Amy and Joyce because they are women and that he goes after the Conways initially because they kill Mike but also because they are part of the town that has "ringed him in." This seems a classic persecution complex. Lou then



says he has read a great deal by "a guy name of Kraepelin" who has described symptoms of persecution, guilt and frustration in the form of schizophrenia. Lou then makes a very cloaked statement. He says, "It was written, you might say, about—But I reckon you know, don't you." This is another statement that is left to the reader to puzzle over.

Lou is initially reluctant to tell the truth to Walker but Walker says he had some courses in agronomy, and learned an important lesson there. The lesson, according to Walker, is that the only difference between a weed and a plant is the location. As an example, he says that a hollyhock growing in a field is out of place, and is therefore a weed. The point Walker seems to be trying to make is that he does not care if Lou is a weed or a plant because Lou is not in Walker's area.



Characters

Lou Ford

Lou is a deputy sheriff in Texas just after the oil boom. He is the son of a doctor who has pathological tendencies, recognized by his father so that Lou is carefully watched during his father's lifetime. Lou himself recognizes the "sickness" he deals with though his life and thoughts remain confused much of the time. Lou has a serious persecution complex and believes the women in his life—Amy Stanton and Joyce Lakeland—would each turn him in for beating them. He uses this as a reason to kill them both though he sometimes has to remind himself of the reason he must follow through with the murders. To those who know him, Lou is a kindly person who seems genuinely concerned about others. In fact, he is able to take control of situations in which other law enforcement officials flounder. One of those is in his handling of drunks. He says he never abuses a person already in custody, seeming to consider it a point of honor. Lou says the people he kills all asked for it, and he does not know why they continue to come to him when they could as easily commit suicide. Lou's attitude on this point seems typical with that of the cold-blooded pathological killer he is. Lou uses adages as a way of dissipating his own temper though it seems to greatly annoy other people. When Lou is faced with a situation in which he talks to another man who claims to be a doctor, Lou steps aside from his unlearned country boy routine and refers to complex health-related topics. He notes it feels good to do so. Lou considers himself superior to others with regard to mental reasoning and criticizes the tactics used by the deputy and county attorney who question him. Lou dies at the conclusion of the book.

The Bum

The bum is a drifter who encounters Lou as the story opens. Lou initially sees the man through a window and then goes outside where the bum is waiting for him. When the man asks for a handout, Lou crushes out his cigar into the bum's hand, the first sign the bum has that Lou is deranged. Though the bum apparently leaves town right away and is not seen again for some time, he is actually hanging around and spying on Lou. When Lou goes to the farmhouse where he kills Elmer Conway and Joyce Lakeland, he does not realize that the bum sees him go. The bum does not realize the significance of what he has seen until much later, when he learns of the murders and comes to the conclusion that Lou had something to do with it. The bum tells Lou he has seen other men just like Lou during his own time in prison. He says he knows what Lou is, apparently referring to the fact that Lou is a pathological killer. He then tells Lou that the only way to resolve the situation is for Lou to pay him off and that he will leave town after receiving five thousand dollars in cash. Lou pretends to go along but has no intention of giving the man the money. Prior to the bum's arrival, Lou beats Amy Stanton to death, planning to then kill the bum and to tell the story that he had come on the scene in which the bum had killed Amy. However, the bum escapes and Lou has to chase him, though the bum is killed by a deputy. The county attorney does not fall for



the elaborate scene, having already come to believe the worst of Lou and asking why the bum could possibly have wanted to be in Lou's home at all.

Joyce Lakeland

One of Lou's victims, he initially contacts her at the request of the sheriff because she is accused of being a prostitute. Lou immediately begins a sexual relationship with her though he almost beats her to death on their first encounter. He later sets up an elaborate scene in an attempt to cover up his murder attempt though she does not die as he had planned. When they meet as the story comes to a conclusion, Lou kills her with a knife.

Chester Conway

The father of Elmer, owner of the Conway Construction Company and the man Lou seems to believe ordered Lou's adoptive brother, Mike, killed. Chester is a powerful person and never seems willing to accept that anyone would be anything less than completely respectful to him and that everyone will bend to his will without question or exception.

Elmer Conway

Son of Chester and another of Lou's victims, Elmer is planning to leave town with Joyce Lakeland, believing they are going to get married. Joyce actually plans to ditch Elmer and meet up with Lou though she does not realize that Lou does not plan to keep his side of this bargain. Elmer is in the shadow of his father's personality. Lou shoots Elmer after Elmer discovers Joyce Lakeland in the bedroom of her home where Lou has beaten her almost to death.

Mike Dean

Lou's adopted brother, Mike was taken in by Lou's father when Mike, only six, was orphaned. When someone asks Lou how he felt about having to share his father's estate with Mike, Lou points out that he was even younger and all he knew was that he had a brother. He says he loved Mike as he would have a biological brother. Mike takes the blame for Lou's having raped a tiny little girl of only two years old and does his time in jail for that crime. After his return from jail, Lou's father helps arrange a position for Mike as a building inspector though the attitude of the town is against him. Mike falls—or is pushed—from building he is inspecting and dies.



Amy Stanton

Lou's long-time girlfriend and the woman everyone expects he will marry. Amy is a clingy person who cannot imagine life without Lou, regardless of how poorly he treats her. For his part, Lou says he never felt he and Amy had made any decisions regarding each other, but that others simply put them together and expected they would remain so. Lou says he fears Amy will put the clues together and be able to tell what he has done, using this as his reason for killing her. He beats her to death in his house and tries to blame it on the bum.

Johnnie Pappas

The teenage boy who is working at a gas station when Lou gives him a twenty dollar bill marked from the Conway murder. Johnnie believes Lou really cares for him and Lou claims he does, but when Johnnie is in jail being accused of the murders because he has the twenty in his possession, Lou kills him and makes it look like a suicide.

Howard Hendricks

The county attorney and the first person to believe Lou might have had something to do with the murders of Elmer Conway and Joyce Lakeland. Howard comes to believe Lou is not guilty but later changes his mind and makes accusations though Lou is able to thwart every one of them.

Bob Maples

The county sheriff and Lou's boss. Bob believes Lou is what he seems and is angry when Howard accuses Lou of having played a role in the murders of Joyce Lakeland and Elmer Conway. Bob feels guilty he did not stand up for Lou more forcefully at that time and tells Lou so. It is while they are in Fort Worth that Bob learns there are others who believe Lou is guilty and Bob is so upset over the situation that he drinks himself into a stupor. When it becomes obvious that Lou is guilty of several murders, Bob shoots himself, apparently unable to withstand the stress of the situation.

Officer Jeff Plummer

The officer who waits at Lou's house the day after Amy Stanton is murdered, turning everyone away. Jeff is adamant on the subject of Lou's guilt but is equally adamant on the point of respect, calling down the county attorney for calling Lou a "son-of-a-bitch," saying that a man should not disrespect another man's mother. His reaction is the same when the attorney makes an off-color remark about Amy Stanton. At that point, Jeff insists the attorney not talk in this way about Amy because Jeff says he liked Miss Amy and that his children, who had her as a teacher, also liked her.



Objects/Places

Central City, Texas

Where Lou Ford lives

Derrick Road

The road where Joyce Lakeland lives

Conway Construction Company

The company owned by Chester Conway

Central City Labor Temple

Where Mr. Rothman works as a union director

Branch Place

The house next to the farmhouse where Joyce Lakeland lives and where Lou pulls in with the story that he is changing a flat tire on the night of the murders

The Barn on Lou's Property

Currently used as a garage, this is where Lou rapes a little girl.

Slim Murphy's Gas Station

Where Johnnie Pappas takes a job and where Lou gives him the marked twenty dollar bill

Fort Worth

Where Joyce Lakeland is taken to the hospital for medical attention after Lou beats her almost to death



West Seventh Street

The location of the Fort Worth hotel where Bob and Lou were to stay while Joyce Lakeland is in the hospital

The Library

Lou's favorite place in his house

The Courthouse

Where Lou works

The Insane Asylum

Where Lou is held until the attorney comes and forces his release



Themes

Self-Absorption

Lou Ford is the epitome of a self-absorbed person interested in no one and nothing other than himself. For example, Lou is a young man when he rapes a two-year-old girl and allows his adoptive brother, Mike Dean, to take the blame for him. Lou does not tell anyone the truth, but allows Mike to take the blame and to serve his time. Lou seems to never stop to think that he has ruined Mike's life or at least never seems to care that he has. Another example is seen in Lou's belief that Amy and Joyce will both figure out his guilt and will tell on him. Lou is so totally involved in his own life that he never stops to consider that both women care about him so much that they would never tell on him. This seems a contradiction but it really is not. Lou is simply so self-absorbed that he focuses all his thoughts and actions on how a particular action will impact him. Probably the most overt and cruel example of this self-absorption is seen in his decision to kill Johnnie in order to keep Johnnie from giving police information that would lead to his arrest.

Playing a Role

Lou spends the majority of his life playing the role of the dull, trustworthy deputy to the point that most people are taken in by the act. This act is seen most clearly when Lou does away with his persona during his conversation with the man posing as John Smith, the doctor interested in purchasing Lou's house for a medical practice. During that conversation, Lou quizzes the man on medical theory and ideals, using words that are well above the level he would have used under normal circumstances. After the conversation is over, Lou says that it felt good to discard his role. What is interesting is that Lou has played this role so well that even the young woman who believes herself in love with Lou has fallen for the act. Though she is as intimate as it is possible to be with Lou, Amy has never realized that Lou is actually a very intelligent man. There comes a point at which Amy asks Lou if he wants to be a doctor and then laughs at the thought that Lou, who she believes to be slow and plodding, could aim for such a thing. Lou has others fooled as well, including Bob Maples, his boss. Bob believes in Lou to the point that he takes his own life when it is obvious that Lou is the killer.

Desire for Revenge

Revenge is at the heart of most of Lou's actions. The root of his quest for revenge is found in the time his father finds out that there is a sexual relationship between Lou and their housekeeper, Helene. Lou says that his father acts on the information in such a way that Lou believes there is no way that he could ever regain his father's love, trust and respect. Lou seems to blame Helene for the entire situation and notes that every woman he has a relationship with in later life is the embodiment of Helene. Lou goes so



far as to say that the little girl he rapes fits that category. From this perspective, it seems that all Lou's actions with regard to women are based on his need for revenge against Helene for having turned his father against him. To a lesser degree, Lou seeks revenge against Chester Conway, citing his belief that Chester had ordered the murder of Mike Dean. Mike's death had inadvertently caused the death of Lou's father. With an eye toward revenge against Chester, Lou plans to kill Chester's son, Elmer, believing that would hurt Chester much more than Lou lashing out at Chester personally. When Lou is questioned about the possibility of his role in the death of Elmer, he admits that he had wanted some revenge against Chester and that he had really wanted to arrange for Elmer to leave town with a prostitute, an action that Lou believes will hurt Chester. This takes some amount of pressure off the investigation into Lou's involvement.

Style

Point of View

The story is written in first person from the perspective of Lou Ford. The perspective is completely limited with the reader learning only those facts that Lou chooses to relate. As a rule, the story is written in a very informal tone with a language that seems almost reminiscent of a diary or journal. In chapter twenty-one, however, Lou changes this somewhat to speak directly to the reader. He says he had ignored clues that indicated his fellow law enforcement officials were closing in on him as a suspect, but that he feels certain the reader had not ignored those clues. He says, "But I reckon you've known the truth all along." This first person perspective as a journal hits a problem with regard to believability as the final chapter winds down and Lou is actually killed. Had the story played out like this, Lou would not have been able to write the final chapter. At this point, the story loses some of the impact of a journal or diary, though the first-person perspective in this case is very dramatic. A problem with this first-person account is that the reader is left to guess at some things that are presented as Lou decides to tell them. In some cases, the ambiguous statements and convoluted ramblings are less-than-clear and the reader has to decide on meanings for himself. Some readers may not appreciate the use of this journalistic style at those points.

Setting

The story is set in Texas in 1952. The overall setting is real, that of the state of Texas and the time frame. However, the specifics are probably not. The setting is described well and that lends an air of credibility to the story. For example, the author details some aspects of Lou's house, including the library, which is described as his favorite room. The house is further described as having a laboratory which was part of the house because of his father's medical practice. The various details included are meant to give the reader an overall picture of the setting and in this aspect, the author is successful. Other specific settings include the hotel at Fort Worth which is where Lou and Bob Maples stay while Joyce Lakeland is reportedly dying in a nearby hotel, and the farmhouse where Joyce Lakeland is living. The time of the story is detailed; Lou says that Amy Stanton dies on April 5, 1952. The time setting seems reasonable to the story line and believable. The book is copyrighted in 1952. While the setting seems reasonable, the storyline itself seems rather theatrical.

Language and Meaning

The story is based on a very convoluted storyline with Lou at the heart of it. Lou is demented and the story is written as a first-person account from Lou's perspective. Lou is schizophrenic, chronically paranoid and mentally unstable. Based solely on the fact that the story is being told by Lou, the story is not presented in a straight-forward style.



The storyline races from one thought to another and sometimes seems to make little sense, in keeping with Lou's illness and attitudes. Lou is disorganized and focuses often on facts that he believes to be true. This often leads the reader into trains of thought that are not true. The words used are fairly straight-forward and most readers will have little trouble understanding the individual words, though some of the thoughts are difficult to understand. There are some points that are left to the interpretation of the reader, such as the statement that Lou makes regarding his murder of Amy Stanton in which he says that she might have committed suicide. There is also some repetition that may become annoying to some readers. For example, Lou says several times that he killed Amy Stanton on April 5, 1952, and then goes back to explain some prior act. He does this on several occasions, each time saying that he is getting ahead of himself and has something else to tell before he gives the details of that murder.

Structure

The book is divided into twenty-six chapters of widely varying lengths. Some of the chapters are only three pages but others run to more than fifteen. The average seems to be around ten. As a general rule, the story runs in a fairly chronological order with only a few notable exceptions. Probably the most important and obvious of these is near the end of the book when Lou continues to say that he has murdered Amy Stanton, but that he cannot get ahead of himself and has to tell it as it happens. Then he again says that he has murdered Amy and again says that he has skipped some information and has to get back on track. The significance of this seems to be that Amy's death is very important to Lou, arguably more so than the other murders he commits. Another case of the chronology issue occurs as chapter one ends and chapter two begins. At the end of chapter one, Lou says the bum is waiting for him outside the diner, but he also refers to a "her" that is creating problems in his life. He then drops back and tells the story of "her" who turns out to be Joyce Lakeland before returning to the moment of leaving the diner to talk about his encounter with the bum. It is up to the reader to determine the significance of this, if any.



Quotes

"Striking at people that way is almost as good as the other, the real way. The way I'd fought to forget—and had almost forgot—until I met her," Chapter One, p. 5.

"Out here, you say yes ma'am and no ma'am to anything with skirts on; anything white, that is. Out here, if you catch a man with his pants down, you apologize ... even if you have to arrest him afterwards. Out here you're a man, a man and a gentleman, or you aren't anything. And God help you if you're not," Chapter Two, p. 8.

"'I mean'—I hesitated—'knowing Mike, we were sure he couldn't be guilty.' Because I was. Mike had taken the blame for me," Chapter Three, p. 20.

"All you need is a tip that a guy is guilty. From then on, unless he's a big shot, it's just a matter of making him admit it," Chapter Seven, p. 61.

"Sometimes, most of the time, I should say, I can sleep eighteen hours and still not feel rested. Well, I'm not tired, exactly, but I hate to get up. I just want to stay where I am, and not talk to anyone or see anyone," Chapter Ten, p. 94.

"'This hurts me,' I said, 'worse than it does you.' And I knifed my hand across his windpipe. Then I reached down for his belt," Chapter Twelve, p. 120.

"Amy came to see me every day—in the morning for a few minutes on her way to school, and again at night. She always brought some cake or pie or something, stuff I reckon their dog wouldn't eat (and that hound wasn't high-toned—he'd snatch horseturds on the fly), and she hardly nagged about anything, that I remember," Chapter Fourteen, p. 133.

"But I can tell you you're on the wrong track. I've known all those boys for years. They wouldn't do a thing like that any more than I would," Chapter Fifteen, p. 142.

"I knew I had to kill Amy; I could put the reason into words. But every time I thought about it, I had to stop and think why again," Chapter Sixteen, p. 154.

"What are you going to say when you're drowning in your own dung and they keep booting you back into it, when all the screams in hell wouldn't be as loud as you want to scream, when you're at the bottom of the pit and the whole world's at the top, when it has been one face, a face without eyes or ears, and yet it watches and listens ... What are you going to do and say?" Chapter Twenty-One, p. 204.

"'A weed is a plant out of place.' I find a hollyhock in my cornfield, and it's a weed. I find it in my yard, and it's a flower. 'You're not in my yard, Mr. Ford,'" Chapter Twenty-Four, p. 257.

"Because they hadn't got the point. She'd got that between the ribs and the blade along with it. And they all lived happily ever after, I guess, and I guess—that's—all. Yeah, I

reckon that's all unless our kind gets another change in the Next Place. Our kind. Us people," Chapter Twenty-Six, p. 244.



Topics for Discussion

List the crimes of Lou Ford. How does he cover up each one? What are his reasons behind each one?

What kind of person is Lou Ford? What kind of relationship does he have with his family members?

How does the bum come into Lou's life? What is it that he sees that makes him return to Lou's life? What is the significance of Lou burning the bum's hand the first time the two meet?

What is the relationship between Lou and Johnnie Pappas? Lou seems amazed that he can actually care about Johnnie. Does it seem that Lou does care for Johnnie?

Who is Amy Stanton? Joyce Lakeland? Elmer Conway? Mike Dean? Helene? Chester Conway? Jeff Plummer? Billy Bob Walker? Rothman? Howard Hendricks?

There are several times when Lou seems to feel confident that he is not going to be caught in any of his crimes. List at least three instances in which he takes specific action in an effort to keep himself from being caught.

Did Lou kill the bum? Did he kill Bob Maples? Support your answers. Could the argument be made in court to charge Lou for these murders? Why or why not?

Does Lou have an illness? Support your answer.