

A Lost Lady Study Guide

A Lost Lady by Willa Cather

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Plot Summary

The novel, "A Lost Lady," by Willa Cather sketches the changing relationship between a young boy in the western town of Sweet Water and a worldly but beautiful lady from California. The boy, Niel Herbert, was a little boy when he first saw Mrs. Forrester and believed her to be something "not of this world." By the time he is 19, Niel's opinion of Mrs. Forrester has changed to chagrin as he watches her flirt with boys that Niel believes are below her social class.

One of the themes that recurs in Cather's novels is the celebration of the pioneer. In this particular novel, Niel realizes that he is seeing the end of the glorious age of the pioneer. The men who claimed land in the west and tamed that land grow old during Niel's youth and early adulthood. He watches as their pioneer dreams are dashed by dwindling incomes and failing health. One example of these pioneers is Captain Daniel Forrester. His high moral standards will not allow him to remain rich while those who depended on him to protect their money lose most of what they have. As a result, Mr. Forrester and his wife are forced to rent part of their property to a crude man who destroys its beauty and encourages Mrs. Forrester to invest money in illegal ventures.

By the conclusion of the novel, Niel finally determines that he is angry with Mrs. Forrester for her determination to live and go on with her life despite the death of her husband. While the people of the town are talking about Mrs. Forrester because of her habit of inviting young men to her house for dinner, she believes that she is doing what is best for them by sharing with them the ways of the life she knew. Niel, who had taken off a year from school to care for the Forresters during Mr. Forrester's last days, feels the time he sacrificed for Mrs. Forrester was wasted.

One of the challenges of the novel is for the reader to determine what type of relationship Niel hoped to have with Mrs. Forrester. He sees her as a friend, a mother figure, and as a woman that he loves deeply. When Niel sneaks over to the Forrester home one morning when Mr. Forrester is away on business, he is upset to find her alone with another man. Similarly, after the death of Mr. Forrester, Niel believes that with the right man, Mrs. Forrester could be saved. It should be considered as one reads that book that Niel believes he is this man capable of "saving" Mrs. Forrester.



Part One, Chapter One

Part One, Chapter One Summary

The novel, "A Lost Lady," by Willa Cather sketches the changing relationship between a young boy in the western town of Sweet Water and a worldly but beautiful lady from California. The boy, Niel Herbert, was a little boy when he first saw Mrs. Forrester and believed her to be something "not of this world." By the time he is 19, Niel's opinion of Mrs. Forrester has changed to chagrin as he watches her flirt with boys Niel believes are below her social class.

Chapter One begins with a brief description of the aristocratic nature of the railroad and the people who made their living through this type of work. One house is mentioned that exceeded the hospitality of others along a stretch of the Burlington railroad. This house is identified as that of Captain Daniel Forrester. It is located in the town of Sweet Water. Forrester was himself a railroad man.

It is noted that it was not the house that was exemplarily, but instead the people who lived there. The first building that a person riding the train that comes into the town of Sweet Water see is this house. The Forresters have arranged their property, not with the intention to make it profitable, but comfortable and enjoyable for them. Forrester is proud of his livestock and even prouder of his young, pretty wife. She is always there to greet their guests, no matter what she leaves to do so and the guests feel honored by her.

Forrester admits to a friend that his wife never looked so pretty as when she had been chased by their new bull. She is twenty-five years younger than Forrester and is also his second wife. The two married in California and for a while, used the Sweet Water house only a few months each year. When Forrester was forced to retire after a riding accident, he and his wife moved to live in Sweet Water full time.

Part One, Chapter One Analysis

This section of the novel sets the reader up with all of the information that he needs to build a foundation for the action of the book. The Forrester family is considered rich for that time period as Forrester has made his living working with the railroad. Forrester also has become friends with the aristocracy of the time period. He invites these men often to his house where they enjoy meeting and having the company of his young wife.

Although the Forrester house is not described as being attractive, it is said that it was the people who lived in the house that made it extraordinary. The people felt welcome and comfortable there. The Forresters also feel comfortable there as they have been able to maintain their property as they wish because they have money. For instance, a creek that anyone else would have dammed up so the land could be profitable is



allowed to flow by Forrester. He likes the way the meadow looks with the stream trickling through it.

Mrs. Forrester, who will be the main focus of the novel, is described as a young and slightly impetuous woman. She is twenty-five years younger than her husband who at the time of the novel, has been forced to retire from the railroad business because of a riding accident. Mrs. Forrester is also described as being very beautiful. She is so beautiful that her beauty encourages the men who visit to try to live up to her own youthful energy. When there is company, Mrs. Forrester drops whatever she is doing to greet them. She does not bother to clean up or be sure that she looks presentable. She is never criticized for this habit because she looks attractive even if she has been busy working, cooking, or being chased by a bull.

Although it is not overtly obvious, keep in mind the reactions that Mrs. Forrester has to the male guests who visit at their home. Her eagerness to greet them could come simply from the desire to be a good hostess but could also come from a deeper attachment, particularly to the men.



Part One, Chapter Two

Part One, Chapter Two Summary

As Mrs. Forrester is arranging roses in the bay window of her home one day, a group of boys walk up to the house with fishing poles and lunch boxes. Among these boys is Niel Herbert who is Judge Pommeroy's nephew. The boys decide Niel should be the one to ask Mrs. Forrester permission to fish on her property but it is instead George Adams who steps forward and asks permission. Mrs. Forrester asks the group of boys if they are happy school is out, asking specifically about Niel. After the boys leave to fish, Mrs. Forrester asks her cook to bake a pan of cookies for the boys' lunch.

When Mrs. Forrester brings the cookies, George stands as she walks up to them. Niel follows his example. Mrs. Forrester chats easily with the boys. Even at their age, the boys recognize that there is something different about Mrs. Forrester. After lunch the boys are talking about Judge Pommeroy's dog, who they believe had been poisoned, when the boy who they believe poisoned the dog joins them. Poison Ivy is older than the other boys and acts scornfully toward them. He carries a gun and gamebag even though there is no hunting allowed on the Forrester's property. In contrast to what the younger boys think about Mrs. Forrester, Ivy believes that he is just as good as Mrs. Forrester is.

Ivy hits a woodpecker with a rock from his slingshot then traps it in his hat. Ivy puts the bird's eyes out with a blade from his taxidermy kit. The blinded bird flies into several trees before finding its way back to its nest. Niel climbs the tree intending to kill the bird and put it out of its pain. Instead, Niel falls from the tree. Ivy helps the boys carry Niel to the Forrester house hoping to get a chance to look around inside. Mrs. Forrester leads the boys to lay Niel on her bed, then asks them to wait on the porch. Ivy waits in the doorway with the intention of making himself at home, but Mrs. Forrester orders him onto the porch also. The doctor is called who comes and sets Niel's arm, then takes him home.

Part One, Chapter Two Analysis

This chapter focuses on an experience that Niel had with Mrs. Forrester as a young boy. He and his friends have had a delightful day until a boy whom they refer to as Poison Ivy joins them in the meadow. Notice the detailed description that Cather gives of Ivy. She describes him as being ugly with a swollen-looking face and rust colored freckles. Ivy is ugly in his actions as well as his appearance. He is known around town for his past time of torturing and killing animals. He is also described as being haughty. He is hateful to the younger boys and disrespectful to Mrs. Forrester. Cather indicates that the boy "liked being ugly." Which could be taken to describe his appearance, his actions, or both.



This is the first time that Niel has been in Mrs. Forrester's house. It contrasts greatly with his own where he lives with his father and a distant cousin. Mrs. Forrester's house is clean and tidy, she treats him lovingly as she cares for him until the doctor arrives. Niel describes his own home as being one of disorder and disarray. Niel appears to be ashamed of his home as it is noted in the novel that he does not like anyone to be there. He also spends much time around his uncle, the judge, whom he feels makes him of some consequence in the town. Niel feels that his own family is surrounded with a cloud of failure and defeat.

This chapter stresses the different classes of people in Sweet Water. Niel believes Mrs. Forrester is a member of one of the highest classes of people. Poison Ivy, however, is one of the lower classes of people although he doesn't seem to realize it. Ivy believes himself just as good as the Forresters and sees no reason he should have to show them any special respect.



Part One, Chapter Three

Part One, Chapter Three Summary

For several years, Niel only sees Mrs. Forrester during the summer. She always invites him to her parties and dances. After Mr. Forrester's accident, the two spend more and more time at their house in Sweet Water. Meanwhile, the future of Sweet Water is growing dim. Ranchers are leaving and railroad officials don't stop by as often. Niel's father is one of the first to leave the town, but his son stays behind with Judge Pommeroy.

One day when he is copying notes for this uncle, Niel and the judge are visited by Mrs. Forrester. She invites the two to dinner. The Ogdens as well as Frank Ellinger will be visiting them. Mrs. Forrester requests that Niel drive her home. During the drive, Mrs. Forrester asks Niel to entertain Constance Ogden for her. She insists that Niel come inside to warm up. As they talk, Niel learns the Forresters will be staying all winter this year. Mrs. Forrester voices her fears that her husband is becoming less healthy and is sometimes unstable on his feet. Niel remembers when he first saw Mrs. Forrester at the Episcopal Church, he recognized her as being a different breed from the other ladies who lived in Sweet Water.

Part One, Chapter Three Analysis

In this section of the novel, Niel's infatuation with Mrs. Forrester begins. He believes she belongs to a world set apart from others. He sees her as being completely classy, polished and beautiful. His early opinion of her is that she is perfect. Note, however, that Niel does not know Mrs. Forrester very well, he is only judging her based on her looks and her actions in public.

The health of Mr. Forrester is beginning to go down hill as the health of the town of Sweet Water is also going down hill. Mr. Forrester's riding accident has caused him to have to walk with a cane. Mrs. Forrester tells Niel that sometimes he is uncertain and unsteady on his feet. Note that she describes feeling when he fell one day while walking to their carriage as if "one of the mountains had fallen down." This description indicates that Mr. Forrester is a source of strength for Mrs. Forrester. She depends on his strength and steadiness for her own strength and steadiness.

As the town shuts down, Niel's father is one of the first to leave. Niel stays behind to work in the judge's office, however. He is finally able to keep his rooms the way he wants them and soon has the entire house and office as well as his own space, neat and tidy. This impulse to clean shows a bit of an obsessive nature in Niel's personality. He likes things to be neat and ordered, and is upset when things do not stay this way.



Part One, Chapter Four

Part One, Chapter Four Summary

At Mrs. Forrester's dinner party, Niel tries to talk to Constance but finds her dissatisfied looking and difficult to talk to. Although Niel finds it less difficult to talk to Mrs. Ogden he notices that the room brightens visibly when Frank Ellinger enters. Niel knew nothing bad about this man, it is noted that he felt there was something evil about him. Niel notices that Constance eats the cherry out of Frank's drink, but leaves the one that Niel offers her untouched. Niel realizes that Constance is in love with Frank even though he is much older than she.

During dinner, Mrs. Ogden asks Mr. Forrester to tell how he found the property on which they now lived. After they are finished eating, the group plays cards. Before Niel and his uncle leave for the evening, Mrs. Forrester reminds Niel he is to entertain Constance for her the following afternoon. Mrs. Forrester helps her husband prepare for bed, and then hearing a tinkle from the dining room, she finds Frank Ellinger there taking a nightcap. She warns him that she believes there is someone hiding on the staircase and the two go into the parlour. As the two interact with one another, there is a strange familiarity as well as an excitement between them.

Part One, Chapter Four Analysis

In this section Mrs. Forrester invites Niel to her dinner party with the request that he try to amuse a teen girl who has her eye on an older man. At the end of the chapter, it appears that there may be something going on between Mrs. Forrester and Frank Ellinger, another dinner party guest. Ellinger is described as being attractive but yet having a bad reputation. Niel can't decide if he likes the man or not. He doesn't have any real evidence of Ellinger being undesirable, but senses something evil about him.

One of the things that characterizes Cather's writing is her description of people and places. She describes each person thoroughly focusing not only on their physical characteristics, but also on the characteristics of their personality and moral beliefs. She paints a full picture of each person, giving both the good and the bad characteristics. For example, note the pains that she takes to describe Captain Forrester's way of treating his guests. Each person, including his wife, is asked what cut of meat they'd like to be served. He also goes to each lady individually to ask if the smoke from his cigars might be offensive to them before he lights up.

Notice also Cather's many references to pioneers and the taming of the west. This is one theme that Cather uses regularly in her novels. She works the idea of westward expansion into this particular novel by having Mrs. Ogden request that Mr. Forrester tell Constance the story of when he picked out the land which he now owns. It turns out that Mr. Forrester first saw the land when he was on a job with the railroad. Even before he

knew he would own it, he tells the group he already had set up in his mind how his house would be built and how he would set up and run his homestead. He believes it is through dreams, such as the one he had for his home, that great things are accomplished.



Part One, Chapter Five

Part One, Chapter Five Summary

In this chapter, Niel arrives at the Forrester home just as Mrs. Forrester and Frank Ellinger are leaving to get cedar boughs for Christmas. They have told Constance she can't come because the pole is broken in the big sled. Constance hints that she wants Niel to get a team from the livery and take her to the river also, but Niel tells her all the teams are out. Meanwhile, in the sleigh, Mrs. Forrester and Frank discuss how long it has been since they have seen one another. Frank chides Mrs. Forrester for not allowing him to write her love letters. They drive to a deep ravine where they finally stop. Adolph Blum happens to come upon the empty sleigh while he is hunting. He watches as Mrs. Forrester and Frank emerge from the woods. Frank is carrying the buffalo robes. He holds Mrs. Forrester to him for a long time before helping her into the sleigh. Frank goes back and cuts the cedar branches as Mrs. Forrester waits in the sleigh. As they start back, Mrs. Forrester asks him to drive slowly. Adolph Blum does not share Mrs. Forrester's secret with anyone.

Part One, Chapter Five Analysis

It is in this chapter that Mrs. Forrester's secret comes out to the reader. She requested Niel to entertain Constance because she wanted an evening alone with her lover Frank Ellinger. Apparently the two have been having an affair for some time. Frank chides her for not letting him write love letters to her and Mrs. Forrester softens, saying she likes to remember pleasant things now that she is growing older.

Luckily it is Adolph Blum and not another person, like Poison Ivy, who sees the two together. Adolph is not disposed to give away Mrs. Forrester's secret because she has kept a few secrets for Adolph. She also treats Adolph like a person even though he feels that he belongs to a much lower class of people than he. Note that Adolph's feelings about Mrs. Forrester are much the same as Niel's. They both admire the lady because of her beauty and her kindness. Adolph, however, has not put Mrs. Forrester in the position of being altogether perfect as Niel has. Although he is surprised, Adolph doesn't seem too deeply disappointed when he discovers that Mrs. Forrester has a hidden life.

When Mrs. Forrester and Frank are alone, Mrs. Forrester tells Frank that she hopes to train Niel to be useful. In many ways, Mrs. Forrester already has Niel under her thumb as he does things for her, such as trying to entertain Constance, that he might not do for other people.



Part One, Chapter Six

Part One, Chapter Six Summary

It is during Mrs. Forrester's first winter on the hill that Niel believes that he gets to know her well. Three nights each week, Niel and his uncle go to play whist, a card game, at the Forrester's home. Niel finds himself becoming comfortable in the Forresters' home and with their way of living.

In March, thirty inches of snow falls in Sweet Water. Three days after the storm, Niel braves the snow to take the Forresters' mail to them. Mr. Forrester lets Niel in once he reaches the house as Mrs. Forrester is lying down with a headache. Mrs. Forrester comes downstairs as the two men are looking at Mr. Forrester's bulbs and flowers. Niel notices that she smells like alcohol. Mr. Forrester asks for tea and toast for the afternoon. He watches to make sure Mrs. Forrester does not get any alcohol from the sideboard. Mr. Forrester reads the paper aloud to them. When Mr. Forrester goes to sleep by the fire, Mrs. Forrester makes Niel run down the hill with her so that she can get out of the house. Once outside, Mrs. Forrester wonders what will happen to her if she and her husband have to stay at Sweet Water during the winter from then on. As Mrs. Forrester comments on Niel's shoulders, he gets an image of Frank Ellinger's broad shoulders rising above him.

Part One, Chapter Six Analysis

Spending the winter in Sweet Water has obviously been difficult for Mrs. Forrester as she is accustomed to having many people around her and plenty to do. After being shut up in the house for only three days, she is already sick because she feels trapped. Her conversation with Niel as they walk down the hill indicates that she fears the coming winters in the small town.

When Mrs. Forrester sees Niel in the house and learns that he has brought the mail, she seems a little brighter. After she has read her letters, note that Niel believes that she seems almost like the old Mrs. Forrester again. One must wonder if one of the letters that Mrs. Forrester received was from Frank Ellinger and if this letter was the reason for her sudden gaiety.

Notice that even though Niel does not want to admit it, in the back of his mind, he realizes that Mrs. Forrester is comparing him to Frank Ellinger. When Mrs. Forrester tells Niel that his shoulders are not broad enough, he immediately calls forth a mental image of Frank Ellinger's broad shoulders. Note also that in the winters when the Forresters went away, they went to Colorado Springs, the same place where Frank Ellinger lives.



Part One, Chapter seven

Part One, Chapter seven Summary

Niel has been reading books from Bohn's Classics. At his uncle's suggestion that he save the book "Don Juan" for later, Niel decides to read it first. As Niel works his way through the love stories, he believes the characters in them acted as people do in real life. He allows the material in these books to mold his perception of other people and their place in the world.

In June of that summer, one of the banks into which Mr. Forrester had put much money, has failed. Niel's uncle tells him he is afraid that the Forresters will lose a lot of money from this failure. Mr. Forrester and the judge go away to see about the bank for several days. While they are gone, Frank Ellinger comes to visit Mrs. Forrester. At this same time, Mrs. Forrester has let Mary, her housemaid, go to spend a week with her mother.

One day while Mr. Forrester is away, Niel wakes early and decides to go and visit Mrs. Forrester before Frank Ellinger leaves the hotel. He finds some wild roses and cuts blooms for Mrs. Forrester. He decides he will leave the flowers for Mrs. Forrester outside one of the windows of her bedroom. Niel believes his gift will cause Mrs. Forrester to lose interest in Frank Ellinger. As he bends down to place the flowers outside her window, Niel hears Mrs. Forrester laugh. Then he hears a man's laugh.

The next thing Niel knows, he is at the foot of the hill. He doesn't know how he has gotten there. He throws the flowers intended for Mrs. Forrester into a mud hole. Niel believes that his world has been shattered. That he has lost some beauty that can never be recaptured. He wonders if there is always some hidden coarseness behind every beauty in the world.

Part One, Chapter seven Analysis

Now that Niel has recognized Mrs. Forrester's secret, he believes that his world has fallen apart. What is interesting to note, though, is that Niel had come to regard Frank Ellinger as an enemy. He is irritated when he learns that this man is staying in Sweet Water and he will not have Mrs. Forrester all to himself. In certain ways, Niel makes the same advances toward Mrs. Forrester as Frank Ellinger does. Niel believes, however, that his advances are more pure in nature, such as a knight in one of the love stories that he reads wooing a beautiful lady. Niel is shocked to learn that his beautiful idol is really just a person like everyone else.

One interesting point of this chapter is that Niel begins to judge life by the romance stories that he is reading. The writer notes that if Niel had not been exposed to these stories, his life might have turned out differently. Instead of realizing that the books he reads are just stories made up by authors as a form of entertainment, Niel believes

these stories represent real life. It is upon this backdrop of the love stories that Niel attempts to understand what he has just witnessed at Mrs. Forrester's house.



Part One, Chapter Eight

Part One, Chapter Eight Summary

Niel joins his uncle and Mr. Forrester as they speak to Mrs. Forrester about the news from the bank. All the couple now has is the house, Mr. Forrester's pension and whatever money their livestock will bring. The judge explains that Mr. Forrester could have come home with more money, but it would have been at the expense of the people who also had money in the bank. Mr. Forrester indicates that as long as his wife is satisfied, he will not regret his decision.

After Mr. Forrester goes to lie down, Judge Pommeroy explains the situation to Mrs. Forrester. Many of the people who had entrusted their money to the bank had worked for Mrs. Forrester and had done so because they trusted him to treat them fairly. None of the other directors of the bank had argued that the only fair avenue was to share the bank's losses with its depositors. Mr. Forrester, however, had not allowed any of the common people who put money in the bank to lose on their investments even though it had hurt him personally. The judge tells Mrs. Forrester he is proud of her husband, but wishes someone else had gone with him, someone who could have kept him from losing almost everything.

When Mrs. Forrester goes to wake Mr. Forrester for lunch, the judge and his nephew hear her calling for them. She needs them to help get pillows to prop her husband up. Judge Pommeroy calls for Dr. Dennison to come because Captain Forrester had a stroke. During the next several weeks, Niel spends much time at the Forresters' home helping Mrs. Forrester to take care of her husband. One morning, Cyrus Dalzell comes to see Mr. Forrester. Niel notices that Mrs. Forrester brightens during his visit. Cyrus tells Mrs. Forrester how much she was missed during the last winter and that his wife had arranged for the Forresters to come and stay with them the following winter.

Part One, Chapter Eight Analysis

It is in this chapter that the true beauty of Mr. Forrester's personality comes out. Because of his honesty and his honor, he would rather put himself and his wife in a position where they have little excess than to make the people who believe in him suffer. He seems concerned only with what his wife thinks about his decisions. She indicates only that she has never questioned his decisions about business before. Mr. Forrester has a stroke while he is lying down. It must be wondered if this was brought on by stress and if this stress is caused by losing his money or by the uncertainty of the future.

Judge Pommeroy tells Niel several times that he wished that he had not been the one to go with Mr. Forrester to attend to this particular business. Note that he mentions that Ivy Peters might have been a better lawyer for the case as his morals are different from the



judge's. The judge also commends Niel for changing his career plans to the study of architecture as he believes the field of law is becoming too corrupt for any honest person.

After Mr. Forrester has suffered his stroke, Cyrus Dalzell pays Mrs. Forrester a visit. He comes without his wife and Mrs. Forrester treats him with such familiarity that one wonders if there was not at some time a relationship between these two. Even Niel notices the change in Mrs. Forrester within the half hour that passes after Cyrus first arrives.

Part One, Chapter Nine

Part One, Chapter Nine Summary

After his stroke, Mr. Forrester drags his left foot and has trouble with his speech. The doctor, however, says that unless the man were to have another stroke, he still had several years of life ahead of him.

Niel leaves in August to begin studying for architecture school in Boston. Niel worries that Mary, Mrs. Forrester's housekeeper, will be getting married in the fall and the couple will not be hiring another housekeeper. Although Niel can't stay for supper, Mr. Forrester pours sherry and gives him his famous toast of "Happy Days."

As Niel leaves the house and heads down the hill, he wishes that he could ask Mrs. Forrester what she does with her elegance and high birth when she is with a man like Frank Ellinger.

Part One, Chapter Nine Analysis

This chapter of the novel closes the part one. Mr. and Mrs. Forrester have reached their lowest point with Mr. Forrester giving up almost all of their wealth in order to keep the working people who have deposited money in his bank from losing any of their funds. Niel's opinion of Mrs. Forrester has also sunk to a new low as he catches her with Frank Ellinger.



Part Two Chapter One

Part Two Chapter One Summary

A span of two years has passed between the first and second parts of this novel. Niel meets Ivy Peters as they ride the train to Sweet Water. Niel learns that Ivy in addition to being a lawyer, Ivy is renting some land from the Forresters on which he farms. He tells Niel how he has drained the marsh. Ivy talks about how the influential friends of the Forresters don't help them much and the couple has come down in the world. He says the captain doesn't seem to be all there most of the time but that Mrs. Forrester took good care of him. He also notes she drinks too much. Niel feels Ivy's actions are done out of spite for the Forresters. After Ivy leaves, Niel thinks to himself that it is men like Ivy who will ultimately destroy the dream of those who had conquered the West.

Part Two Chapter One Analysis

In this section of the novel, Niel learns that Sweet Water will not be the same town that he remembered when he left two years ago. To make the news even worse, Niel learns about the changes from Ivy Peters, one of the people he dislikes the most. Ivy brags about the way that he is "helping out" the Forresters by draining the marshland they loved so much and renting it from them for farming. Ivy seems pleased that the people who he believes once thought they were better than he are now depending upon him for their livelihood.

It is also in this chapter that Niel considers the disappearing dreams of those who conquered and settled the west. He wonders if all of the land is destined to be stripped of its beauty and seen only in terms of its usefulness to the economy as Ivy has done to the Forrester place. He also notes to himself that it seems that these large landowners had great power to conquer, but very little when it came to retaining what they had won.



Part Two, Chapter Two

Part Two, Chapter Two Summary

Niel finds Mr. Forrester seated in his rose garden, staring at a sun-dial. He tells Niel that Mrs. Forrester is expecting him. Niel finds Mrs. Forrester in a hammock in the grove as Mr. Forrester directed him. Mrs. Forrester does not object when Niel hugs her, hammock and all. She tells him that she has been expecting him and has been looking forward to him coming home. Mrs. Forrester briefly asks Niel if he thinks Mr. Forrester is acting strangely by just sitting and watching the sun-dial, but quickly moves on to other topics. She asks Niel about the habit she's heard that some women now smoke after dinner, like the men. She comments that she doesn't like the changes that have come about in the modern ladies.

Mrs. Forrester comments that it takes all of her energy to keep up the house and still feels that it isn't done as it should be. She comments that if she had known she would have to move the furniture they bought from Chicago herself, she probably would have been happier with lighter pieces. During their conversation Mrs. Forrester warns Niel to realize in the beginning how important money is. They walk to where Mr. Forrester is and Mrs. Forrester asks Niel to walk with the captain as she goes ahead to start a fire. Before Niel leaves, Mr. Forrester asks him to mail some letters for him. In addition to his letters, Mr. Forrester hand one addressed to Frank Ellinger from Mrs. Forrester. Mr. Forrester presses Niel to look at the envelope and points out Mrs. Forrester's fine handwriting. As Niel goes away from the house, he believes that Mr. Forrester knows about Mrs. Forrester's affair with Frank Ellinger.

Part Two, Chapter Two Analysis

During his first visit to the Forresters since he has been back in town, Niel finds that many things have changed, but some have remained the same. Mr. Forrester is slow moving and spends his days watching a sun-dial that was a gift to him from Cyrus Dalzell. Mrs. Forrester stays frustrated with her attempts to keep her house clean. Now that she has to do the work, she wishes they had settled for lighter furniture. As they walk back toward Mr. Forrester, Mrs. Forrester warns Niel to not take for granted how important money was.

Although some people in the town have termed Captain Forrester as "slow-minded" since his stroke, Niel believes he is just as mentally capable as ever. While asking Niel to mail some letters, he makes a point to have Niel look at the address on the one letter that Mrs. Forrester is sending. Niel believes that this is Mr. Forrester's attempt to let Niel know that he knows all about what is going on with his wife and Frank Ellinger.



Part Two, Chapter Three

Part Two, Chapter Three Summary

Although Niel had planned to spend much of his summer reading the Forresters' grove, he doesn't go often because Ivy Peters is there so frequently. He believes the way that Ivy visits with Mrs. Forrester when she is not yet dressed for company is shameful. Ivy either treats Mr. Forrester as if he isn't there, or speaks to him as if he is not very smart. One day Niel hears Ivy and Mrs. Forrester speaking from a distance and believes from what he hears that Ivy is flirting with Mrs. Forrester. Ivy doesn't even offer to carry Mrs. Forrester's bucket into the house for her.

When Niel mentions Ivy's impolite behavior to Mr. Forrester, he admits the man is rude. Niel tells Mr. Forrester he had met a man who worked on the railroad with him. When Niel mentions the man described Mr. Forrester's wife as beautiful, Mr. Forrester encourages Niel to tell Mrs. Forrester about this compliment.

One night in July, Niel walks about town and comes across Mrs. Forrester standing on a bridge crossing a creek on their property. Mrs. Forrester says Mr. Forrester is asleep, but as they talk a door slams from the direction of the hill. Ivy Peters walks their way from the house. He has been investigating their barn to see if he can put work horses in it. Not only does he not ask permission to use the barn, he also demands lunch the next day from Mrs. Forrester. Although Niel offers to show Ivy Peters how he should treat the Forresters, Mrs. Forrester begs him not to do so, saying that they depend on the man. Not only does Ivy have a five-year lease on the land, he has also invested some money for Mrs. Forrester. Mrs. Forrester says that although she knows Ivy's methods are probably unlawful, she doesn't work with the judge because his legal way of doing things does not work in modern society. She even tries to speak in favor of Ivy Peters and convince him that Ivy isn't as bad as he seems. She tells Niel that with the money she is earning off her investments, she could go back to California in a few years. She wants to live as she did on a short trip to Glenwood Springs that she believes wouldn't have happened if it hadn't been for Ivy Peters. She has been planning all along to get out of the hole that has been created at Sweet Water. Alone again later, Niel wonders if Mrs. Forrester will be able to make it out of her current life or if she will be pulled down by the care that the captain requires.

Part Two, Chapter Three Analysis

In this chapter of the novel, the reader gets an idea how trapped Mrs. Forrester feels in her role of caretaker. She has gone so far as to give her money to a man who she believes is investing it illegally in order to earn enough money to go back to California. Mrs. Forrester does not mention to Niel what she plans to do with Mr. Forrester when she is rich enough to make her move, but Niel remembers that the doctor has said that the captain might have as many as 12 good years of life left in him.



Also in this chapter, Niel is confused and angered by the Forresters' relationship with Ivy Peters. Mr. Forrester seems sad that he is no longer able to command respect as he once did. Mrs. Forrester tries not to appear as if she notices Ivy's rude behavior at all. She is willing to do whatever it takes to get back to the type of lifestyle that she believes is owed to her.



Part Two, Chapter Four

Part Two, Chapter Four Summary

Torrential rains have made getting to the Forrester home difficult, but Ben Keezer still manages to ride over to deliver the couple's mail. Niel learns Ben has taken over a copy of the Denver paper which includes Frank Ellinger and Constance Ogden's wedding announcement. Niel tries to walk to the Forresters to make sure Mrs. Forrester it okay but cannot because the bridge is out. He decides to go back the following day. Once back at his uncle's office, Niel settles down to read. After several hours, he hears footsteps outside the door and opens the door to find Mrs. Forrester waiting there. She demands the phone. She wants to make a long distance phone to the Antlers. Niel notices she smells strongly of alcohol. He tries to convince her that she doesn't need to call right away. Niel is concerned the nosy operator Mrs. Beasley will spread rumors because she will be able to hear the conversation. Mrs. Forrester demands that she be allowed to speak to Frank Ellinger and Niel finally consents. She at first only picks at Frank and asks why he did not tell her about his wedding. It is when Mrs. Forrester asks Frank to stop at their place on his next business trip and he declines that Mrs. Forrester becomes angry. Mrs. Forrester proceeds to tell Frank off but he doesn't hear because Niel has cut the telephone line.

Mrs. Forrester lays her head down and cries. When she stops crying, Niel tries to wake her but realizes she has passed out from the alcohol. He removes her wet clothing, wraps her in his robe and goes to his uncle's home. He sends his uncle to stay the night with Mrs. Forrester while he goes to the Forresters' home to watch Mr. Forrester. He plans to take Mrs. Forrester home the next morning before others are awake. Niel explains to Mr. Forrester that Mrs. Forrester had to go into town to answer a long distance phone call. He explains he is going to bring her home. Once in town, Niel meets Mrs. Beasley. She has already told Molly Tucker about Mrs. Forrester's phone call.

Part Two, Chapter Four Analysis

As Niel was afraid, Mrs. Forrester is highly upset by Frank Ellinger's marriage to Constance Ogden. After all, while the two were visiting with the Forresters, Frank was agreeable to leaving Constance behind while the two of them spent time together. During her time at Niel's home, he thinks quickly and acts in a way that is intended to protect her from the nosy ears and prying eyes of the town. Niel also tries to protect Mr. Forrester from what his wife did during the night when she called Frank Ellinger.



Part Two, Chapter Five

Part Two, Chapter Five Summary

Mrs. Beasley and Molly Tucker decide when Mr. Forrester has another stroke that this has been caused by her unfaithfulness to her husband. Mr. Forrester is no longer able to care for himself at all. Mrs. Forrester falls apart as a result of the stress. Realizing her weakness, the people of the town take the opportunity to pry into the Forresters' life and their house. Niel hears what the people of the town are saying about Mrs. Forrester. He tells his uncle that he plans to take a year off school to help the Forresters. He plans to borrow Black Tom from his uncle to clear all of the gossips out of Mrs. Forrester's house.

Once Niel is able to get the house quiet, Mrs. Forrester sleeps for nearly a week. Even the captain improves under Niel and Tom's care. After Mrs. Forrester is better, she takes over the kitchen so that Black Tom can go back to Judge Pommeroy. Although Niel was at first unhappy that he had to give up a year of school, he soon finds satisfaction in helping the Forresters. He is happy and comfortable in the familiarity of the Forresters' home. As Niel spends the last days of the captain's life with him he begins to realize how well the man knows his wife and how much he values her.

Part Two, Chapter Five Analysis

In this chapter, life for the Forresters goes from bad to worse when Mr. Forrester has another stroke. Mrs. Forrester is still overcome with grief from her affair with Frank Ellinger and as a result, the gossipy women of the town finally make their way into her house. Because she is so tired with the care of her husband, Mrs. Forrester gives into the women and lets them have the run of her home. In his invalid state, Mr. Forrester is unable to do anything to keep the women out.

When Niel hears people talking about Mrs. Forrester and her things, he is outraged. He steps up as protector and puts her house back to right. In the calmness and quiet that Niel creates, Mrs. Forrester is able to get the rest that she needs to build her strength back up. Even the captain improves and tells Niel that he is grateful for the quiet. In a way, Niel has sacrificed his own life to help save the couple. For a while, he is able to feel in the house the way that he did as a child.

Part Two, Chapter Six

Part Two, Chapter Six Summary

Since they are away or on business, none of Mr. Forrester's closest friends are able to attend his funeral. Judge Pommeroy and Dr. Dennison are his only close friends who serve as pallbearers. Adolph Blum stops by the Forresters' home on the day of the captain's funeral with a bunch of yellow roses for Mrs. Forrester. Mrs. Forrester cries the only time she did the entire day. On the way home from the funeral, Mrs. Forrester tells Judge Pommeroy that she wants the sundial moved to the cemetery for her husband's headstone. She also plans to plant some of his roses nearby.

Part Two, Chapter Six Analysis

Although many people attend his funeral, none of the influential people whom the Forresters had always entertained at their house are able to attend. But it is the simple things, like the roses from the Blum boys, that make Mrs. Forrester cry. Although she may have cheated on her husband during his life, she shows she knew him perhaps as well as he knew her when she decides to have the sundial moved to the cemetery. She also plans to plant his own rosebushes next to his gravesite.



Part Two, Chapter Seven

Part Two, Chapter Seven Summary

Niel wonders if the man had been considering visiting Mrs. Forrester. He wonders why Mr. Ogden did not go to see Mrs. Forrester. He believes perhaps it was because he feared he would find her changed in some way that would change his opinion of her. Niel realizes that his own opinion of Mrs. Forrester has changed. Since the death of her husband, she had been ungrounded and not herself.

Ivy Peters begins spending more time with Mrs. Forrester. Then he begins to take his friends to her house to visit with them. Niel tells Mrs. Forrester about the gossip that is circulating concerning her behavior but she does not care what they are saying. When he suggests that she move back to California, she tells Niel she plans to do so just as soon as she is able to sell her house. She believes she can get \$20,000 for the house. Mrs. Forrester tells Niel that in the mean time, she believes she is helping the boys of the town by showing them the way civilized people act.

In the next three weeks, Niel does not go to visit Mrs. Forrester again. Mrs. Forrester had come to see Judge Pommeroy but after the way she treated him, he does not have the same care for her that he did before.

Part Two, Chapter Seven Analysis

In this chapter of the book, one of the friends that used to visit the Forresters often in their days of plenty has stepped forward to try to help Mrs. Forrester in her need. In a way, Niel blames himself for discouraging Mr. Ogden from helping Mrs. Forrester by telling about the way that she has treated all of her friends of old. Mrs. Forrester has taken all of her accounts and money from Judge Pommeroy and has put Ivy Peters in charge of them. Judge Pommeroy feels betrayed by Mrs. Forrester by this move, but it should be remembered that Judge Pommeroy indicated to her that he was not a good man to conduct business in the modern world. Mrs. Forrester apparently takes Judge Pommeroy at his word when he suggests that a lawyer like Ivy Peters would do better in modern society.



Part Two, Chapter Eight

Part Two, Chapter Eight Summary

One day in May, Mrs. Forrester visits Niel at his uncle's office to ask him to dinner. Niel allows her to persuade him and then later is angry with himself because he agreed. Friday evening Niel notices that Mrs. Forrester has set a nice table though he wonders if the boys she has invited will even notice. Ivy Peters seems to be the center of attention. When Mrs. Forrester enters the room, the boys stand up in honor of her. Niel believes the action looks alarmed rather than honoring but acknowledges that she has at least taught the rough boys to stand when a lady enters the room.

As Niel watches Mrs. Forrester during the dinner, she wonders why she puts herself to such trouble for these low class boys. She tries to engage the boys in conversation but fails. Niel feels as if he should help her and tries also, but his attempts fail as well.

After dinner, Mrs. Forrester tells the boys that she intends to have a cabin in the Sierras when she moves back to California where all of them can come and visit her. As she remembers California, Niel asks her if she has ever told the boys how she met Captain Forrester. Mrs. Forrester tells them about the time that Mr. Forrester was one of the men who found her after a mountain climbing accident.

Niel notices that she leaves out the part of the story where Mrs. Forrester was engaged to millionaire Ned Montgomery who was killed by the husband of another woman just a few weeks before their wedding. Mrs. Forrester was sent to the camp to protect her from the publicity of the trial.

Mrs. Forrester does talk about the way that she felt safest when Captain Forrester was holding her, carrying her out of the mountain canyon where she fell during the accident. When she required medical procedures on her broken legs, she called for Mr. Forrester to hold her hand. When Mr. Forrester asked her to marry him, she eagerly said yes.

Part Two, Chapter Eight Analysis

In this section of the novel, Niel cannot understand why Mrs. Forrester chooses to surround herself with the boys that she chooses. He does not understand that he life has always consisted of parties and groups of people. To be alone would be contrary to her nature. Instead of trying to adapt to her life as it is, she instead calls in the "stagehands" as they are referred to in the book to stand in the place of the influential people she once used to surround herself with.

Mrs. Forrester's life has always been dominated by money, it seems. Her father was apparently well off as he was a partner of Mr. Forrester before the two married. She was engaged to a millionaire who was apparently cheating on her, before she was married to Mr. Forrester. Scandal has followed her everywhere she has gone. Her fiancé was shot



and killed by what can be assumed to be a jealous husband. Soon after ward, she instigates a mountain climbing trip in which her friend, a man, is killed. The two tell no one where they are going but instead sneak off alone together. She marries Mr. Forrester for his strength and his ability to calm her. Without him, Mrs. Forrester is lost in her own life.



Part Two, Chapter Nine

Part Two, Chapter Nine Summary

In this final chapter, Niel is both eager to be getting back to his studies and at the same time sad to be leaving the town in which he grew up because he feels there will be nothing to come back to. He finds he is angry with Mrs. Forrester because she prefers to continue life, even though life has changed. Niel leaves without saying goodbye to the lady. He feels only contempt for her as he watches her allow Ivy Peters put his arms around her from behind as she makes pastries at the kitchen table. Niel swears he will never go to her house again. He feels betrayed by her actions. He is happy only that he helped Captain Forrester to die peacefully.

In Boston, Niel gets news of Mrs. Forrester occasionally. She is seen often with Ivy Peters. Although she does not look well, Judge Pommeroy tells Niel there is nothing any of Captain Forrester's friends can do for her because she has let herself become so entwined with Ivy Peters. After the death of his uncle, Niel learns that Ivy Peters bought the home from Mrs. Forrester and that she had gone west.

As time passes, Niel loses the anger that he felt toward Mrs. Forrester. He can think of her again as a bright, but impersonal memory. One evening Niel happens to meet Ed Elliot in a hotel in Chicago. He says he promised Mrs. Forrester that he would give Niel a message from her if he ever say Niel again. Ed had met Mrs. Forrester at a hotel in Buenos Ayres where he had recognized her by her laugh. She has married again and is the wife of a rich, cranky man who owns a stock ranch. She asks Ed to tell Niel that she thinks of him often. Although Niel asks if she is still alive, Ed says that she is not. That three years ago, the Grand Army Post, to which she always sent a check to put flowers on Mr. Forrester's grave received a draft for the future care of Mr. Forrester's grave in memory of his late wife.

Part Two, Chapter Nine Analysis

In this section of the novel it appears that Niel's feelings toward Mrs. Forrester have come full circle. When he learns that she has remarried and is doing well, Niel hopes he will be able to see Mrs. Forrester again. The lady, however, has already passed away by the time that Niel gets his message from her. It is fitting that both men share at the end of the novel that they are happy that Mrs. Forrester found someone who took good care of her in the last years of her life.



Characters

Marian Ormsby Forrester Collins

It is Mrs. Forrester who is the main focus of this novel. At the beginning of the novel, Mrs. Forrester is described as being young and pretty. She is married to Captain Daniel Forrester who is twenty-five years older than she is. Niel, a young boy whom Mrs. Forrester befriends because he is Judge Pommeroy's nephew, believes that Mrs. Forrester is the most beautiful and morally perfect person that he has ever met. Mrs. Forrester, however, is having an affair with Frank Ellinger, a man who visits the Forrester home often. After her husband's accident the two are forced to spend more and more time at their house in Sweet Water. During the times that she is shut up, Mrs. Forrester gets more and more agitated. She is accustomed to attending parties and dancing all through the year and doesn't know what to do with herself without these activities to distract her.

Mrs. Forrester's behavior becomes worse when her husband first loses much of the couple's money in a bank failure, then has a stroke causing him to require much care. One evening Mrs. Forrester visits Niel late at night asking to use the phone. She is drunk. She wants to call Frank Ellinger because he has gotten married to Constance Ogden. When Frank Ellinger refuses to see Mrs. Forrester she becomes angry and tries to give him a piece of her mind, but Niel cuts the phone cord, keeping her words to her lover private.

After the death of her husband, Mrs. Forrester attracts the attention of the townspeople by inviting men who are much younger than she to dinner and other social events at her home. Although most believe her behavior is inappropriate, Mrs. Forrester believes she is helping the boys by showing them courtesy and how to act in formal situations. Mrs. Forrester also begins to spend a considerable amount of time with a scandalous character named Poison Ivy. Ivy convinces Mrs. Forrester to turn her back on the friends that she and her husband shared and devote herself to him. At the conclusion of the novel, Poison Ivy has bought Mrs. Forrester's house from her and she has moved back to California where she remarried.

Niel Herbert

Niel Herbert is Judge Pommeroy's nephew. He is 12 when he first appears in the novel. It is through Niel's perspective that Mrs. Forrester is described. Niel sees Mrs. Forrester first when he was a very young boy who had never seen anyone as pretty or as kind as she before. As Niel grows older and becomes more worldly, he begins to see what he believes are changes in Mrs. Forrester. One must recognize the perspective through which Niel sees Mrs. Forrester in order to understand why he reacts to her as he does. Niel comes from a family in which he had only a father, with no female role model. The cousin who lives with the family is supposed to keep house but does not do so. Niel



compares his own meager and messy house with Mrs. Forrester's and believes that his situation is one he should be embarrassed by.

When he goes to live with his uncle, Niel decides he does not want to marry. He does, however, read the romance classics owned by his uncle and believes these are real examples of the way that life is lived. Therefore his idea of life is formed in the pages of books where knights in shining armor swoop in to save damsels in distress. Niel never imagines that a lady, such as Mrs. Forrester, might not want to be saved. Niel takes off a year from school in order to care for Mr. and Mrs. Forrester after the man has his second stroke. With her behavior after her husband's death, Niel believes he has been deceived and betrayed by his friend. With the affection that Niel held for Mrs. Forrester one must also wonder if Niel does not believe he might be the man capable of saving Mrs. Forrester if she had been agreeable.

Ivy

Ivy Peters is a boy a few years older than Niel whom Niel has always disliked. Niel finds the boy not only physically ugly, but also rude and crass. Niel is offended by the way that Ivy seems to think that he owns the Forresters' property when he brings a gun with him onto the land even though he knows hunting is not allowed there. One the day that Niel breaks his arm, Ivy helps the younger boys carry Niel to the house because he wants to try to see inside. He plans to sit down in one of the chairs and pretend like he is at home. Instead, Ivy finds himself escorted outside by Mrs. Forrester's firm but kind manner.

Several years later, after the Forresters have lost their money, Ivy is still working at the Forresters. He seems determined to destroy them. In a move that some people believe is helpful to the Forresters, Ivy has rented the meadowland from the Forresters and is farming it. Niel believes it is out of spite to the couple that he drained the land that Mr. Forrester once thought was so pretty. Even while Mr. Forrester is still alive, Ivy makes a habit of making himself at home on the Forresters' property. He dictates how the Forresters can help him, for instance, he demands Mrs. Forrester provide him lunch one day. Ivy also treats Mr. Forrester in a way that is both hateful and disrespectful. At the conclusion of the novel, Ivy has convinced Mrs. Forrester to turn her back on all of the friends that she and her husband once had. He has also encouraged her to invest money in his illegal ventures.

Captain Daniel Forrester

Captain Daniel Forrester was a railroad man. He was the husband of Mrs. Forrester. It is during his first marriage that Mr. Forrester sees the property on which his house sets and decides that one day it will be his. In keeping with the dream, Mr. Forrester sets up his life and home just as he had imagined on the hill in Sweet Water. However, Mr. Forrester did not dream that a bank failure would cause him to lose much of his riches. Mr. Forrester's actions during this time period show how much stock he puts in his



honor. Even though the other owners of the bank have skirted their responsibilities to the people who have entrusted their money to them, Mr. Forrester cannot allow himself to be rich while these people lose much of their money.

One of the aspects of Mr. Forrester's personality is how well he knows his wife. Despite knowing her, however, Mr. Forrester still loves her and believes she is of worth. It is as if Mr. Forrester's belief in his wife makes her the person who she is. Even as Mr. Forrester gets sicker and sicker after a riding accident and two strokes, he still clings to and depends on his wife. He also keeps the same beautiful morals and grace of a truly high-class gentleman. Even when he is treated with disrespect by Ivy Peters, Mr. Forrester does not retaliate.

Constance Ogden

Constance Ogden is a teenaged girl who visits the Forrester family in Sweet Water. Mrs. Forrester employs Niel to entertain Constance with the idea that she will fall in love with Niel and forget Frank Ellinger, with whom Mrs. Forrester is having an affair. Throughout their time together, Constance shows a preference to spending time with Frank over Niel. Constance is visibly upset when Mrs. Forrester and Frank go on a sleigh ride and leave her behind with Niel. Constance, however, ultimately wins as she gets married to Frank Ellinger several years later.

Judge Pommeroy

Judge Pommeroy is Niel's uncle. After Niel's father moves out of Sweet Water, Niel lives in the rooms behind his uncle's law office. Judge Pommeroy has always acted as Mr. Forrester's lawyer until after his death when Mrs. Forrester transfers her business to Ivy Peters. Judge Pommeroy is highly upset when Mr. Forrester loses so much money through his bank's failure especially since it is under Pommeroy's guidance. Judge Pommeroy mentions that he sometimes wishes a less moral lawyer, like Ivy Peters, had gone with Mr. Forrester to deal with the bank failure.

Frank Ellinger

Frank Ellinger is the slick, handsome Colorado man with whom Mrs. Forrester is having an affair. When Niel first meets Frank Ellinger, he is not sure if he likes him or not, but feels an evil presence about the man. When Frank Ellinger marries Constance Ogden without letting her know, Mrs. Forrester is angered. She calls Frank Ellinger at the Antlers, the hotel where the couple is staying. Frank Ellinger tells Mrs. Forrester that he will not be back to see her.



Orville Ogden

Orville Ogden is one of the men who used to visit the Forresters regularly. After Mr. Forrester's death, Orville Ogden is the only one of the couple's old, influential friends who steps in to try to help Mrs. Forrester. He suggests to Niel that he could petition in Washington to have Mrs. Forrester's pension increased. After hearing the way that Mrs. Forrester has treated her old friends hatefully since her husband's death, Orville leaves Sweet Water without even going to visit the lady.

The Mrs. Beasleys and Molly Tuckers

This group of ladies includes the night time phone operator, Mrs. Beasley, whom Niel was afraid would spread Mrs. Forrester's secret about her love for Frank Ellinger to the neighbors. It is Mrs. Beasley and her group of gossiping friends that attempt to take over the Forrester home after Mr. Forrester has his second stroke.

Black Tom

Black Tom is Judge Pommeroy's faithful black servant. He often helps Mrs. Forrester with her dinner parties by waiting on tables. Black Tom also helps Niel clear the Forrester home of the gossips that have congregated there since Mr. Forrester had his second stroke.

Henry Collins

Henry Collins is the final man to whom Mrs. Forrester is married. He is described as a "cranky old Englishman" who is stingy and quarrelsome but rich. At the death of Mrs. Forrester, Henry Collins sends a draft to the Grand Army Post to have flowers put each year on Mr. Forrester's grave in memory of his wife.

Ed Elliott

Ed Elliott is one of Niel's friends who is at the picnic on the Forrester's property the day that Niel breaks his arm. Ed Elliott is one of the young men who Mrs. Forrester invites to her dinner parties after her husband passes away. It is this same man who approaches Niel in a Chicago hotel to tell him about Mrs. Forrester's last years.

Mary

Mary is a Bohemian woman employed by the Forresters as their housekeeper. When the Forresters lose their money in a bank failure, Mary marries her sweetheart, Joe Pucelik, and Mrs. Forrester attempts to take over the care of the house.



Cyrus Dalzell

Cyrus Dalzell is the president of the Colorado & Utah. He is the man who was once met by Mrs. Forrester in her dressing gown. Cyrus Dalzell is also the friend who gives Captain Forrester the sun-dial that he gets so much enjoyment out of in his last years.

George Adams

George Adams is one of the boys who is friends with Niel and who has been brought up to respect ladies. It is George who asks Mrs. Forrester permission for the boys to have a picnic on her property in the second chapter of the book.

Annie Peters

Annie Peters is Ivy Peters' younger sister. She is helping Mrs. Forrester prepare the meal on the day that Niel joins the neighborhood boys for a dinner at the Forrester home after Mrs. Forrester's death. Annie sits next to Niel at dinner, but says nothing to him.

Dr. Dennison

Dr. Dennison is the medical professional who is called to the Forrester home both when Niel breaks his arm and when Mr. Forrester has his strokes. Dr. Dennison is one of the two of Mr. Forrester's closest friends who serves as a pallbearer during his funeral.

Ben Keezer

Ben Keezer is the man who is driving Mrs. Forrester's carriage on the first day that Niel ever sees her. Even after the Forresters lose their money, Ben Keezer continues to help out around the Forrester home.

Adolph Blum

Adolph Blum is the boy who sees Mrs. Forrester and Frank Ellinger and realizes the two are having an affair. On the day of Mr. Forrester's funeral, Adolph brings a box of yellow roses that causes Mrs. Forrester to cry.

Ned Montgomery

Ned Montgomery is the man to whom Mrs. Forrester was engaged before she met Captain Forrester. Ned was a millionaire. He was shot by a jealous husband a few weeks before his planned marriage to Mrs. Forrester.



Fred Harney

Fred Harney is the man whom Mrs. Forrester persuades to take her down the face of Eagle Cliff. A rope breaks as they are descending the cliff and Fred Harney is killed.

Cousin Sadie

Cousin Sadie is the distant relative hired by Niel's father to act as housekeeper for the family. According to Niel, Sadie does more reading and visiting than cleaning.



Objects/Places

Burlington Railroad

The town of Sweet Water is one of the towns along this stretch of railroad that extends into western America.

Sweet Water

Sweet Water is the name of the town where the majority of the action of this novel takes place. Sweet Water is also the name of a river that flows near the town.

The Antlers

The Antlers is a hotel in Colorado Springs where Captain Forrester recuperates after his riding accident. It is to this same hotel that Frank Ellinger and Constance Ogen travel after they are married.

Brown Palace Hotel

The Brown Palace Hotel is the hotel in which Frank Ellinger lives before he marries Constance Ogden.

Happy Days

"Happy Days" is the toast that Mr. Forrester always drinks to at dinner.

An Almost Complete Set of the Bohn Classics

It is these books that Niel finds in his uncle's library that affect his opinion of the world.

Don Juan

"Don Juan" is the book the Judge Pommeroy suggests that Niel read last but Niel chooses to read it first.

Wimbledon Hotel

The Wimbledon Hotel is the hotel in Sweet Water where Niel believes Frank Ellinger is staying during his visit to Mrs. Forrester while Mr. Forrester is away on business.



Massachusetts Institute of Technology

The Massachusetts Institute of Technology is where Niel studies to get his degree in architecture.

Sun-dial

This sun-dial is given to Captain Forrester by Cyrus Dalzell. It is made with a red block of California sandstone from the Garden of the Gods. After his death, Mrs. Forrester decides to have this sun-dial moved to the captain's grave as a monument.

Big Shears Left by the Tinner

Niel uses these shears to cut the phone line before Mrs. Forrester can say anything unbecoming to Frank Ellinger.

Twenty Thousand Dollars

This amount of money is how much Ivy Peters has told Mrs. Forrester that she can get out of the sale of her house. Others who are more practical say she should expect only \$12,000.

The Merry Widow

The Merry Widow is the name that the people of Sweet Water give to Mrs. Forrester after the death of her husband.

Eagle Cliff

Eagle Cliff is the cliff that Mrs. Forrester and Fred Harney are trying to climb down when they fall because a rope breaks. Fred Harney is killed in the fall. Both Mrs. Forrester's legs are broken.

Buenos Ayres

Buenos Aires is the town in which Ed Elliott meets up with Mrs. Forrester after she has moved from Sweet Water.

Cedar Boughs

It is these decorations that Mrs. Forrester and Frank Ellinger say they are going to get but really they are sneaking out for an affair.



Themes

Social Classes

One of the more important themes in this novel is the idea that there are different social classes that make up society. Most of the people of Sweet Water are content to accept the social classification in which they are born. Adolph Blum, for instance, does not tell anyone of Mrs. Forrester's indiscretions with Frank Ellinger because he believes it would not be right for him to do so because he is of a lower social class than she. Adolph maintains the old fashioned idea that people such as Mrs. Forrester should be respected simply because of the place they hold in society. Ivy Peters, however, is one person who refuses to stay in his place. Even though he is coarse and ugly, Ivy Peter believes even as a teen that he is just as good as the Forresters. As an adult, Ivy Peters does what he can not only to prove that he is as good as the Forresters but that he can bring Mrs. Forrester down to his level.

The importance of these social classes is stressed in the first chapter of the novel where Niel describes the two types of people living in the west. He says there are the aristocrats who get their money from working on the railroad, and the day laborers. Mr. Forrester is one of the aristocrats. Even as a member of the higher class of society, Mr. Forrester does not look down upon those less fortunate than he. Even though the people he would cheat by refusing to return their full deposits when his bank fails are not people who could help him in any way, Mr. Forrester refuses to let these people be cheated. He uses his own money to ensure these people are treated fairly. Mrs. Forrester does not seem to have this same respect for people despite their social standing as Niel mentions in the beginning of the novel that he believes the only reason that she speaks to him is because he is the son of Judge Pommeroy.

The Importance of Money

During a discussion with Niel after Mr. Forrester's first stroke, Mrs. Forrester warns Niel never to forget how important money really is. In this novel, money does seem to be really important to Mrs. Forrester. All of her life she has been surrounded with money and wealth. It is not until after Mr. Forrester loses his money when his bank fails that Mrs. Forrester must do her own housework because they can no longer afford a maid. Mrs. Forrester also tells Niel that while she is taking care of her home and her husband the only thing that keeps her going is the idea that one day she will be able to get back to California where she can live again.

Mrs. Forrester has seen the way that Judge Pommeroy's above the table business deals and the incorporation of morals in business have left her and her husband in want. For this reason Mrs. Forrester turns instead to Ivy Peters, whom Judge Pommeroy himself said might have done a better job for Mr. Forrester in the bank failure, to invest her money. Her old friends believe that she has turned on them but in



reality, she is doing whatever it takes to get herself back to the life with which she is most familiar. This includes letting Poison Ivy flirt and spend time with her.

Allegory of Society

Cather's novel can be interpreted to be an allegorical interpretation of society in general. Mr. Forrester, for instance, represents the west. At one time Mr. Forrester was young with a bright future before him. This time in his life would symbolize the early days of the west when people are just beginning to explore and tame the land. As Mr. Forrester gets older, he loses the money and life that once drew people to him. After the railroad is complete, the future of some towns that sprung up in the west are deserted because there is no longer any promise of money or jobs to draw people in. People like Ivy Peters come in and take advantage of the land, just as Ivy Peters has taken advantage of Mr. Forrester and the land for which he has worked so hard. These people are ugly and hateful and will do everything in their power to destroy things that are beautiful such as Mrs. Forrester.

Style

Point of View

This story is told from the third-person omniscient point of view with an emphasis on the experiences and thoughts of Niel. This point of view is well suited to the novel because it allows Niel to tell the story of his experiences with Mrs. Forrester without the reader getting too attached to Niel as a first person point of view might have done. This third person point of view also allows the writer to give an unbiased description of the other characters and their actions. Finally, if the novel was not written in a third person point of view, there would be no way for the author to tell about some of the important events in the plot of the novel such as Mrs. Forrester's secret sleigh ride with Frank Ellinger.

The story is told mostly through exposition with patches of dialogue scattered throughout the book. Cather takes a mostly expository form because of her extensive, but beautiful, descriptions of the characters and places that appear in the novel. The main plot of the novel is also more readily addressed by what Niel is thinking about Mrs. Forrester rather than what the two are saying to one another.

Setting

This story is set in the small western town of Sweet Water. It is a town founded by railroad prospectors. After the railroad is finished and many of the men who helped build the road are dead or have lost their fortunes, such as Mr. Forrester, the town begins to die.

Much of the action in the novel takes place on the Forrester property in the town of Sweet Water. Mr. Forrester found this land while working with the railroad and dreamed that one day it would be his. Several years later, he returns with his wife to build the home place that he had envisioned. Specific settings in the novel include the meadowland that Mr. Forrester refuses to drain because he believes it is pretty. Ivy Peters later drains this land and makes farmland out of it. It is along the banks of the creek that Niel and his friends have their picnic on the day that he breaks his arm. Mrs. Forrester's bedroom is the room to which the boys are directed to take Niel while they are waiting for the doctor. Niel passes many happy nights in dinner parties and card games with his friends in the parlour at the Forrester home. The garden where Mr. Forrester grows his roses is also an important setting in this novel. He spends his days watching a sun-dial after he has his first stroke.

Another setting that is included in the novel is the dining room of a Chicago hotel where Niel happens to run into Ed Elliott. It is here that Ed Elliott passes along Mrs. Forrester's message to Niel and where he tells Niel that the lady has since that time passed away.



Language and Meaning

The language of this novel is very pleasant and makes the story easy and enjoyable to read. Cather spends much of her time describing the characters who appear in the novel. Her descriptions are striking in their completeness. For example, when describing the posts on the front porch of the Forrester home, she does not simply write that they are carved, she writes that they are, "fragile, fussy pillars of that time, when every honest stick of timber was tortured by the turning-lathe into something hideous." This language used by Cather indicates not only the frivolity and extreme amount of carving done to the columns, but also denotes the idea that posts such as these were almost a disgrace to the wood used to make them. The novel is full of descriptions that beautifully portray the characteristics that Cather is trying to describe. Cather also uses plain language in her novel. It is only in one portion of the book, where she describes the speech patterns of Mrs. Ogden that Cather attempts to mimic the characters' accents in her writing.

Structure

This short novel is divided into two parts. The first part of the novel tells the story of Niel's experiences with Mrs. Forrester before he goes away to college. The second part of the novel tells the story of Niel's experiences with Mrs. Forrester after he returns to Sweet Water on summer break after being away for two years. Each of these two parts are divided into nine chapters. The first part of the novel is slightly longer than the second part.

The plot of the novel is fairly simple and straightforward with no subplots. For the most part, the timeline of the novel is linear. It is only the first chapter that breaks this timeline. This chapter is written thirty to forty years after the beginning of the novel. The first part of the novel covers a span of about eight years. Two following years are then skipped between the first part and second part of the novel. It is during this time period that Niel is away at school and Ivy Peters is busy trying to take over the Forresters' property. The majority of the action in the second part of the novel takes place during the one-year time span that Niel takes off from school in order to help the Forresters. Time skips on after Niel returns to school to a day several years later when he happens to meet Ed Elliott and learn of Mrs. Forrester's fate.



Quotes

"The Forrester place, as everyone called it, was not at all remarkable; the people who lived there made it seem much larger and finer than it was" (Part One, (Chapter One, p. 1).

"Mrs. Forrester was twenty-five years younger than her husband, and she was his second wife" (Part One, Chapter One, p. 3).

"George and Niel were already old enough to see for themselves that she was different from the other townswomen, and to reflect upon what it was that made her so" (Part One, Chapter Two, p. 6).

"Except for the fact that he was Judge Pommeroy's nephew, Niel would have been one of the boys to whom Mrs. Forrester would have merely nodded brightly as she passed" (Part One, Chapter Two, p. 11).

"Niel Herbert's father was one of the first failures to be crowded to the wall" (Part One, Chapter Three, p. 13).

"She laughed as if the idea of his predicament delighted her" (Part One, Chapter Five, p. 29).

"She treated him like a human being. His little chats with her, her nod and smile when she passed him on the street, were among the pleasantest things he had to remember" (Part One, Chapter Five, p. 31).

"Curiously enough, it was as Captain Forrester's wife that she most interested Niel, and it was in her relation to her husband that he most admired her" (Part One, Chapter Six, p. 36).

"If the judge had left his Bohn library behind him in Kentucky, his nephew's life might have turned out differently" (Part One, Chapter Seven, p. 37).

"In that instant between stooping to the window-sill and rising, he had lost one of the most beautiful things in his life" (Part One, Chapter Seven, p. 40).

"It was not a moral scruple she had outraged, but an aesthetic ideal. Beautiful women, whose beauty meant more than it said...was their brilliancy always fed by something coarse and concealed? What was their secret" (Part One, Chapter Seven, p. 40).

"The Forresters have come down in the world like the rest" (Part Two, Chapter One, p. 48).

"He felt that Ivy had drained the marsh quite as much to spite him and Mrs. Forrester as to reclaim the land" (Part Two, Chapter One, p. 49).



"Not all the vast territory they had won was to be a the mercy of men like Ivy Peters, who had never dared anything, never risked anything" (Part Two, Chapter One, p. 49).

"Money is a very important thing. Realize that in the beginning; face it, and don't be ridiculous in the end, like so many of us" (Part Two, Chapter Two, p. 52).

"Under the care of him, now that he was helpless, Mrs. Forrester went quite to pieces" (Part Two, Chapter Five, p. 65).

"They went over the house like ants, the house where they had never got past the parlour; and they found they had been fooled all these years" (Part Two, Chapter Five, p. 65).

"Perhaps, with a little encouragement, he would have gone to see Mrs. Forrestet, and he might have helped her. The fact that he had done nothing to bring this about, made Niel realize how much his own feeling toward that lady had changed" (Part Two, Chapter Seven, p. 72).

"He had seen the end of an era, the sunset of the pioneer" (Part Two, Chapter Nine, p. 80).

"All those years he had thought it was Mrs. Forrester who made that house so different from any other. But ever since the captain's death it was a house where old friends, like his uncle, were betrayed and cast off, where common followers behaved after their kind and knew a common woman when they saw her" (Part Two, Chapter Nine, p. 81).



Topics for Discussion

Describe Niel's feelings toward Mrs. Forrester. Why does he feel as he does about her? How do his feelings change as the novel progresses? What causes these changes?

During one of Mrs. Forrester's discussions with Niel, she tells him not to forget how important money was. What does she mean by this?

Compare and contrast the personalities of Captain Forrester and Frank Ellinger.

Discuss the significance of Mrs. Forrester's rings and jewelry in the novel.

Discuss the theme of pioneers as it is presented in the novel.

In your opinion, is there a change in Mrs. Forrester from the first part of the novel to the second? If yes, what is this change? Do you believe she has lost all of her morals and high-bred quality as Niel does or has he just had his eyes opened to her true nature?

Why does Mrs. Forrester feel so indebted to Ivy Peters in the second part of the novel? Why will she not let Niel show him his place?

What does Mrs. Forrester tell Niel that she is doing during her time in Sweet Water caring for her husband?