Lie Down in Darkness Study Guide

Lie Down in Darkness by William Styron

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Contents

Plot Summary

William Styron's LIE DOWN IN DARKNESS tells he story of the Loftis family. Milton Loftis lives in the fictional city of Port Warwick, Virginia with his wife Helen and their daughters, Maude and Peyton. The narrative revolves around Helen and Milton's actual and metaphysical journey to bury Peyton from the time her body arrives at the train station in Port Warwick until they reach the funeral home for Peyton's burial. The story of the Loftises ends as desperately as it begins. The narrative proper, however, ends on a flashy note of hope mixed with bittersweet resignation. That being said, LIE DOWN IN DARKNESS also addresses relationships between blacks and whites in the South during the time period. Specifically, the author's commentary focuses on the interactions between Milton, Helen and Ella Swan, their longtime housekeeper and cook. Most of what takes place happens in and around Port Warwick, Virginia in 1945. A small number of scenes take place in New York City.

Milton is a lawyer of average caliber; Helen is a homemaker. The Loftises have two daughters. Maude (or "Maudie") is the older of the two girls. She is born with a congenital birth defect and as such, is physically and developmentally impacted. Maudie requires a great deal of time and care. Helen dotes on Maudie because of Maudie's specific physical needs. Unlike her older sister, though, Peyton is a golden child in most everyone's eyes. Milton showers Peyton with attention because he adores her. Consequently, he is unable to refuse Peyton anything. Their closeness provokes Helen, who lives each day feeling jealous of her young daughter. Milton is an alcoholic and partly because of this, Helen has become embittered. Furthermore, Milton has been having an affair with family friend Dolly Bonner for a number of years. The tension between mother and daughter, combined with Milton's infidelity and other deeper problems, has caused the deterioration of Milton and Helen's marriage. Milton and Peyton are very much alike in that the daughter is a problem drinker as well. Peyton drinks to kill the pain of hating her mother and to release the inhibition to fuel her impulse to gain attention and adoration from men. In addition, father and daughter also experience a significant amount of guilt in connection with their actions while inebriated. Helen feels continually disappointed in the church and doubts God is moving in her life. Also, Helen feels a strong connection to Reverend Carey Carr, her Episcopalian pastor and spiritual adviser. Maudie dies after taking a fall. She is 23 at the time. Shortly thereafter, Peyton commits suicide in New York City. The strain of losing both of their children and finally, each other, is enough to completely defeat both Milton and Helen in the end.

Chapter 1

Chapter 1 Summary

Milton Loftis and his wife Helen, along with their two daughters Maude and Peyton, live in Port Warwick, Virginia. The Loftises have not been happy in their marriage for quite some time now and their daughters are grown. Additionally, Milton's long-lasting affair with Dolly Bonner is a constant source of shame and irritation for Helen, who is a bitter, lonely woman who experiences a significant crisis in faith. During the course of the narrative, Maudie dies of natural causes associated with a congenital birth condition. After a short marriage to Harry Miller, Peyton, a sexually promiscuous alcoholic, commits suicide in New York City. Milton and Helen's life together has unraveled to the extent that, by the end of the novel, characters themselves and their more than thirty years together are left in a shambles.

The novel opens with the omniscient narrator describing a train trip from Richmond, Virginia to the fictional town of Port Warwick. Milton Loftis, Dolly Bonner, and Ella Swan (the family cook) all ride in Mr. Casper's limousine to the train station. Peyton's body arrives at 11:00am on a roasting hot August day. While awaiting the train's arrival, Milton reminisces about his life. He remembers his father's admonishments about living a responsible, productive life. Milton remembers meeting and marrying Helen and his days at the University of Virginia — when his nickname was "Blow" and where he first learned to drink heavily. Peyton comes to Milton's mind and Maudie as well, while he and Dolly and Ella wait in the sweltering heat for the train, and Peyton's remains, to pull into the station. At one point, Milton finds a letter that Peyton wrote him from New York City. Reading the letter only serves to magnify his grief at losing his favorite child. Ironically, the hearse carrying Peyton's body keeps overheating, much to the consternation of Mr. Casper and Barclay, his assistant.

In this chapter, Helen remembers as well. But her memories are less upbeat than most of Milton's. She thinks back on Peyton's days as a youngster and on her own rejection of Milton's pleas for reconciliation. Most especially, Helen recollects the day she finds out that Peyton is dead.

Chapter 1 Analysis

The narrator address the reader as though the reader is the passenger on the train. Interestingly, the first several pages of the novel are devoted to establishing Port Warwick as a particularly important location within the state of Virginia. This idea of place as more than geography is later made. It is in this letter that first mention of the alarm clock is made. This clock becomes pivotal to understanding the inner workings of Peyton Loftis's mind when it is again mentioned in Chapter 7.

LIE DOWN IN DARKNESS has a rather complex narrative structure. The foundation of the novel is the journey from the train station to the cemetery. The "flesh" of the story is provided by way of individual characters' recollections. Thus, the narrative moves forward and backward in time simultaneously. In this chapter, the reader is introduced to Milton Loftis, the main protagonist and his wife Helen. The chronology of their relationship is laid out, and information is provided which gives the reader some background as to the deeper emotional issues at play in the characters' lives. The use of an omniscient narrator supports the bi-directionality of the narrative. An exception to this assertion, however, occurs in Chapter 7 when Peyton narrates her own story.

Stylistically, the reader will notice that William Styron's prose tends toward lengthy descriptive passages, which feature imagistic language, making some sections of the novel more cinematic than others. Colors play an especially important role in the author's descriptions. Styron's use of italics for Milton's father's statements give the impression of his words somehow being indelible in the character's mind. This stylistic choice proves valuable, in this case, because the italics alert the reader that the significance and impact of Milton's father's pronouncements exist somehow outside of time. Had the author chosen to use quotation marks, the older man's words would simply fade into the story. Formatted in this manner, however, the reader (much like Milton Loftis) has the option of returning to them time and again, independent of the narrative proper. LIE DOWN IN DARKNESS attests to the fluidity of time itself. What happens in front of the eye is, usually, only part of the story.

Chapter 2

Chapter 2 Summary

The train arrives at the station in Port Warwick. After Mr. Casper and Barclay get the limousine running again, Dolly Bonner goes in search of Milton. She finds him in a nearby diner talking to Hazel, the woman who runs the establishment. Dolly comforts Milton in his distress over Peyton's death. Milton remembers the reasons why he once loved Dolly so much. Recently, though, Milton has wearied of Dolly; her submissiveness and meaningless prattling on dampen his spirits. He admits to himself that the only reason he asked Dolly to accompany him to the station is that his wife, Helen, flatly refuses to go. This chapter once again follows Milton Loftis's remembrances of his beautiful daughter, Peyton, and the tense relationship he had with his own father. Milton considered his father a failure and never set much store by the so-called advice his father was always so eager to impart. Milton's mind turns to an episode when Dolly Bonner and her now ex-husband Sclater (pronounced "Slaughter") came to visit the Loftises. Usually, Dolly and "Pookie" as he is known, would come by for drinks at Milton's invitation. Helen does not particularly care for the Bonners. She sees Dolly Bonner and her husband as "vulgar and beastly" and she tolerates their visits — as well as most things in life — out of a need to position herself as a martyr (60). Long before Milton and Dolly Bonner begin their affair, Helen senses the mutual attraction between them, and surmises that this is the reason Milton invites the Bonners to their home so often. Milton and Dolly exchange lustful sweet nothings when their spouses are not looking.

At one point during the visit, La Ruth becomes hysterical when she discovers that Peyton and Melvin "Buster" Bonner have bound and gagged Maudie, leaving her situated near a hydrangea bush. After she and Ella Swan free Maudie, Helen viciously slaps Peyton's face in front of everyone, calling her a devil. Later, Milton escorts Peyton to her mother's room and the girl apologizes for being cruel to Maudie. Helen reacts with unexpected tenderness toward Peyton after she says she is sorry for hurting Maudie. Helen informs Milton that if it weren't for Maudie, she would no longer be able to live with her husband. Helen expresses her concern. She is convinced Milton will destroy their entire family with his drinking and the way he continues to spoil Peyton. Loftis admits to himself that he, after a fashion, is living off his wife's money. The character also feels a sense of shame that his and Helen's marriage turned out to be such a miserable fiasco. Loftis comes to the conclusion that there is something mentally wrong with Helen. Milton takes Peyton for a late-night ride to the coast. Stopping for a bite to eat, Peyton chatters on, seemingly none the worse for wear after the incident with Maudie and the humiliation of being slapped by her mother.

Chapter 2 Analysis

This second chapter introduces the comedic thread of the malfunctioning hearse. This thread runs through the narrative, providing a sense of absurdity. A hearse breaking down on its way to the cemetery is funny, yes. At the same time, however, the hearse breaking down is symptomatic of what is happening in the characters' lives. Each person present experiences a deterioration of his or her own. Milton and Dolly's relationship is coming to an end, and Milton is approaching the moment of his final unraveling. This chapter also serves as the beginning of what the reader is to learn of the deep-seated conflict between Helen Loftis and her younger daughter. It also provides information on the Helen-Milton-Peyton dynamic by way of the scene in which Maudie is tied up and gagged by Buster Bonner and Peyton. Peyton's manipulation of her father becomes evident for the first time, as does Helen's contempt for Dolly Bonner.

Dolly symbolizes a type of femininity which stands in direct opposition to Helen's. Dolly is sensual and flirtatious, open about her sexuality and unafraid of her own sexual power over men. As a mother, she seem rather unconcerned and frankly peevish when it comes to her own child. She reacts to Buster as though he were a mere annoyance, allowing her husband to take the lead. Conversely, Helen represents the feminine martyr—the good mother, the wife who knits when drinking company comes around, the one who suffers for the love of a wayward man. Helen, not unknowingly, uses Maudie's physical condition to her own advantage. Her daughter's care allows Helen the opportunity to keep her husband and younger child at arm's length. Her seemingly unshakable dedication and tireless attention to the girl only serve as a platform to reinforce her piety and selflessness in the eyes of those around them. In addition, Helen's doting on Maudie provides her with a way to garner the sympathy of others in Port Warwick who are aware of Milton's indiscretions with Dolly Bonner. Sadly, it is not revealed until much later that Milton, and not Maudie, is Helen's main point of focus.

Chapter 3

Chapter 3 Summary

Dolly Bonner senses that Milton Lofis is no longer in love with her. She comes to the realization that Milton's choice to have her accompany him to the train station is simply the result of Helen's refusal to do so. Riding in the limousine, Dolly admits to herself that she never cared much for Peyton, who would only ever refer to Dolly as her father's mistress. At this point in the narrative, it is revealed that Milton and Helen are divorcing, following a two-year separation. Her own sense of guilt only serves to compound Dolly's ill-will toward the younger woman. Furthermore, Dolly had always been slightly jealous of Milton's relationship with his daughter. She perceived Peyton as spoiled and manipulative. The couple's affair had gone on for so long that it had become common knowledge; no one was surprised to see them out in public together. Milton was preoccupied then and reluctant to inform Dolly of his troubles. He seemed distraught and was reluctant to share his feelings with Dolly. In part, it is Milton's irritation with Dolly which contributes to his reticence. While they drink their martinis, Loftis exchanges a polite greeting with Sylvia Mason. When he finally does decide to tell Dolly what is troubling him, she is disheartened to discover that Peyton is the subject of his distress. Milton remarks that Peyton has been having problems adjusting to life in New York City after leaving the University of Virginia — and home — to study art in the big city. Peyton's adjustment to married life so far from her father is anything but smooth. Dolly listens halfheartedly while Milton, somewhat inebriated, talks about what happens when Southerners "expatriate" themselves to the North. He is convinced that Peyton will never return to Port Warwick. Milton drones on until he is called away to the telephone. Dolly fears Milton is leaving her, once again, for Helen.

The narrative shifts again and it is 1939. Milton and Helen celebrate Peyton's sixteenth birthday at a country club formal dance. Helen and Milton are still married at the time. Peyton is beautiful even at this age. She is also quite precocious. It is the eve of the beginning of WWII. Helen has a conversation with Mrs. La Farge, whose son Charles, is one of the young people at Peyton's party. Listening absentmindedly to Mrs. La Farge's vacuous ramblings, Helen broods about Milton's affair with Dolly, which by this time had been going on for six years. Helen finds herself wanting to tell Mrs. LaFarge about how she has been wronged by Milton's philandering. Subsequently, Helen discovers that Milton has given Peyton a glass of whiskey. Charlie La Farge comforts Peyton after Helen and Milton argue about the alcohol.

Returning to 1945, Dolly, Milton, and Ella Swan travel through the black section of Port Warwick (referred to by the characters as "Niggertown") listening to the sounds of gospel singing and praise. Daddy Faith has come to town for a revival.

Chapter 3 Analysis

This chapter, once again, is an excellent example of Styron's use of remembrance and recollection. The narrative weaves its way backward and forward in time, producing much the same effect as Milton's experience of Peyton's death and its attendant grief. It is unsettling, difficult to follow, disorienting. Interestingly, past and present are connected by the country club, which on more than one occasion proves to be the site of discomfort for Milton. It is also interesting that Milton, Peyton, and Helen's home life spills over into their social life. The characters are unable to contain their own dysfunction in public. Peyton and Milton get drunk and align themselves against Helen, who is given to making a scene — whether in public or in private. Maudie remains on the periphery until Helen needs her to make a point.

Additionally, the chapter shows Peyton's effect on men other than her father. The scene with Charlie La Farge establishes Peyton as something of a manipulator and a tease. Like her father, Peyton's interest in men is limited to what they are able to give to her. Because of the way Milton spoils her, Peyton assumes that men are simply in her life to serve her, nothing more. She is unaware of how to reciprocate in relationships. Milton's expectations of his daughter become problematic as she gets older. His perception of her as his little girl never changes. Peyton is only slightly more earnest with her father than with other males.

In this chapter, also, Daddy Faith is introduced. The atmosphere surrounding Daddy is carnival-like. There are black people gathered all around him and a big brass band plays. People throw money through the air and into his Cadillac. A big brass band plays and the happening stops traffic. Interestingly, this celebration among the blacks provides a stark contrast to the misery which pervades the lives of Milton Loftis and his family. This misery is not solely related to the circumstances of Peyton's death, but to Milton and Helen's marriage and to his affair with Dolly Bonner and even Maudie's illness. In another sense, the feverish certainty of faith exhibited by Daddy Faith and his followers juxtaposes intricately with Carey Carr and Helen Loftis's crises of belief. Lastly, it bears noting that whereas the blacks in the narrative have little in terms of material possessions, their faith proves more life-affirming than the socio-economic advantages of their white counterparts. Also, the less well-educated white characters in the narrative (Hazel in the restaurant, for instance) also mirror the sort of faith that Ella and La Ruth posses.

Chapter 4

Chapter 4 Summary

Carey Carr picks Helen Loftis up to take her to the funeral home since Helen has refused to go there with Milton. On the way to Helen's house, he remembers the day he and Helen began their friendship, six years earlier. He remembers thinking then what an odd, intense woman she had seemed that first time she had come to their house in the rain. That day, six years prior, Helen had admitted to Carey that she hated her daughter Peyton and that Milton was having an affair with a woman Helen refused to name. They drank whiskey and Helen chain smoked, regaling Carey with her sad, self-pitying tale of betrayal and martyrdom. Her first private conversation with Carey is a series of things remembered; things Helen never told anyone else.

One of Helen's reminiscences entails a meeting she had with Dolly Bonner at the Bide-A-Wee tearoom. Helen had wanted to confront Dolly about her affair with Milton. The two women meet at the tearoom at noon. Sitting across the table from her husband's mistress, Helen feels nothing but animosity toward Dolly Bonner. She tells Dolly that she knows about the affair and that she has had enough of her and Milton's sneaking around. Dolly's ire is aroused and she informs Helen that Milton seeks comfort in her because Helen does not have the capacity to give her husband the kind of affection and understanding that she, Dolly, has plenty of. Dolly assures Helen that she will continue carrying on with Milton for as long as Milton chooses to carry on with her. Also, Dolly admits to being intimate with Milton at the country club on the day of Peyton's sixteenth birthday. Dolly leaves Helen sitting in the Bide-A-Wee alone, embarrassed by the scene the two of them caused.

When Carey arrives at her house, Helen Loftis is still sleeping. It is an unbearably hot day and Carey feels unsure about what to expect from Helen. She is not a woman given to great shows of emotion as far as he can surmise. Upon awakening, Helen must hurry to dress and prepare herself for what is about to happen. When Helen is finally ready to leave for the cemetery, Carey is surprised by the sight of her. Helen Loftis has become old and ugly. No longer the fine-featured woman she had been, her stoicism is off-putting. As she and Carey prepare to leave the house, Helen remarks that, "the end is near..." Carey is confused by this comment but decides not to press Helen for an explanation.

Chapter 4 Analysis

In Chapter 4, Carey Carr does his own share of remembering and the narrative regains its fluidity. Like the other prominent white characters in LIE DOWN IN DARKNESS, Carr recalls his own early life and how he came to be a rector. In general, it would be accurate to say that the novel is something of a study in parent/child relationships. Carr's mother raises him alone. She is exactly the opposite of his wife, Adrienne. The

rector's relationship with Helen Loftis is, for him, one of uncertainty and a good amount of tension. Carey finds it difficult and challenging to minister to a woman like Helen. Her hatred is so well-manicured; it is as though she nurses it, cultivates it almost lovingly. From their first conversation, Carr realizes that something is not quite right about Helen. There is something almost cryptic in her complaints about Milton, Dolly, and Peyton. Carr is unable to clearly identify just what Helen's problem might be. Helen does not admit to believing in God; she admits to wanting to believe. This proves to be the crux of Carey's difficulty; Helen does not seek him out for spiritual solace but to validate her hatred, jealousy, and paranoia.

Helen's memories provide a sub-text in this chapter which reinforces what Carey Carr is feeling. There is a nebulous quality to the hurts that Helen describes to the rector that is mitigated by allowing the reader being able to "see" what happens through the lens of Helen's experience. Again, the linear narrative meets the non-linear and events from the past present themselves in chronological disorder. Helen's interaction with La Ruth accomplishes two things. First of all, it introduces the La Ruth character to the reader independent of her mother, Ella Swan. Out of her mother's sight, La Ruth is liable to do or say just about anything. Her outburst in Helen's bedroom proves that La Ruth is ruled by her emotions and that as such, she has no way to filter what she says. And whereas La Ruth exhibits little or no restraint, Helen Loftis is the very picture of restraint. It is ironic that, on the day of her daughter's burial, Helen would be the person to present such a flat affect when the case should, logically, be quite the opposite. It is La Ruth who bursts into tears. It is La Ruth who makes presentiments about love and sex and death and Helen taking Milton back.

Chapter 5

Chapter 5 Summary

Once again, the limousine overheats on the way to the cemetery. When they stop at a gas station, Milton once again thinks of Peyton. Specifically, he remembers the Christmas of 1941. Peyton had been away at college for three months and was due to come home. Helen had made every effort to decorate the house cheerfully and the family were to have a small gathering. Helen's brother, Edward, is there. Edward had come to Port Warwick specifically to visit his sister and her family before going off to war. At one point before Peyton and Dick arrive, Helen answers the phone. Dolly Bonner calls to remind Milton that she has not seen him in quite some time. Milton assures Dolly that he will see her later that evening. Dolly and Pookie have divorced and Pookie is living in Knoxville. Helen guesses that it was Dolly Bonner who called for Milton and retires to her room. Peyton arrives with Dick Cartwright and Milton remembers thinking that Dick and Peyton had both been drinking before they arrived. Christmas does not go well that year. Helen and Milton argue, and Helen and Peyton's relationship continues to produce a strain on both women as well as the family as a whole. Over turkey dinner, Peyton and Helen once again have a tense exchange and Peyton decides to leave. She will go to a friend's house to meet up with Dick Cunningham. Milton is sad his daughter will not be spending the remainder of the Holidays at home. He feels impotent when faced with the difficulties between his wife and youngest daughter.

In November of 1942, Helen takes Maudie to a doctor in Charlottesville because Maudie has been having more severe leg pain recently. While Helen and Maudie are away, Milton has the house to himself. Just a few days after his wife and daughter leave, Dolly Bonner returns to Port Warwick from Washington. Dolly has been at an apparel buyer's convention. Knowing that Helen has left town, Dolly takes a cab to the Loftis house on her way home from the bus station, much to Milton's consternation. They have a drink and Milton offers to take Dolly home after finishing writing a letter to Peyton. In the letter, he asks Peyton to forgive her mother. He tells Peyton that her mother really does love her. Milton continues, expressing his sadness that Peyton had not come home at all that summer. Milton asks his daughter to come home for a short stay while Helen and Maudie are away in Charlottesville.

Milton and Dolly spend the night together in Helen's bed. Helen sends Milton a telegram the next morning, asking him to come to Charlottesville right away. Milton arrives in Charlottesville the day of an important University of Virginia football game. He stops at the hospital and has a short visit with Helen. He runs into an old fraternity buddy who offers Milton his ticket to the big game. The two men go to a party at the Kappa Alpha fraternity house and Milton catches a glimpse of Peyton in a crush of people, but before he can find her again, she is gone. Milton is very drunk by the time the football game ends and he wanders off, disoriented, in search of Peyton. Peyton finds Milton bleeding after he accidentally falls into a ditch. The two of them return to the hospital.

Helen is upset that Peyton and Milton are both intoxicated when they arrive at the hospital. She had waited the entire day for Milton to return. Helen informs Milton and Peyton that Maudie is dying. She remembers Maudie's friendship with Bennie. Peyton and Dick drive to his family's home.

Chapter 5 Analysis

Chapter 5 is a pivotal chapter in LIE DOWN IN DARKNESS. First of all, it is the longest chapter. The reason that this is significant is that it is also the point in the narrative when the ugliness of Milton Loftis's alcoholism finally becomes apparent to Peyton. Prior to his taking a fall at the football game and humiliating himself all over Charlottesville, one can only assume that Peyton had never before realized her father's desperate love for her. In addition, by witnessing what happens to her father at this point in his life, it can be asserted that Peyton is allowed a glimpse of what she has to look forward to in that Milton's love for Peyton overshadows his love for anyone else in the world. The fact that he leaves Helen at the hospital alone lends credence to this argument.

Peyton's declaration to Dick Cartwright that she can't love aligns her more closely with her mother than the young woman could imagine. Her assertion that she is unable to connect with another person on such a deep level also puts into perspective the way she treats her father. Her admission simply serves to justify her mother's hatred of her. However, that Peyton herself labels her supposed inability to love as "sick" provides effective foreshadowing for what occurs in Chapter 7. Her pronouncement becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. The simple utterance sets in motion something subconscious which eventually comes into the light of Peyton's psychological landscape, rendering her unable to either stop or help herself. She makes the claim partly in an effort to prevent Dickie from talking anymore about marriage. Dick's desire to marry Peyton is borne out of his need to protect and champion that part of her which is incredibly wounded. Unlike her father, this is very much the case with the other men who cross Peyton Loftis's path. Each of them responds to something intangible in Peyton that renders men unable to refuse her and just as unable to rescue her.

Chapter 6

Chapter 6 Summary

On their way to the cemetery, Carey and Helen meet the hearse and limousine at a gas station/roadhouse: the hearse has broken down once more. Inside the roadhouse, Carey tries to talk to Milton about reconciling with Helen. Milton, it turns out, is still in love with Helen and wants her to take him back. The hearse repaired, the small party prepares to resume the sojourn to the cemetery. Before they depart, Carey recollects a visit he made to the Loftis home a year after Maudie's death. By that time, Milton and Helen are reconciled—united in their grief over Maudie's passing, desirous of comfort and normalcy. That same year, Peyton marries Harry Miller, a Jew. It is Milton who convinces his daughter to be married at home in Port Warwick. At the time, Carey Carr had thought this a wise idea, as it would smooth things out between Helen and Peyton. Ssince Peyton had left school and moved to New York City, where, prior to meeting Harry, she had lived a less than chaste life.

On Peyton's wedding day, she and her father are both drunk. Helen reveals her hatred of Peyton to Carey Carr. She tells him she no longer believes in "his" God. Helen watches Peyton interact with Milton and becomes angrier by the minute. She sees her husband and daughter as co-conspirators in the destruction of their family and holds Peyton solely responsible for Maudie's death, since it was a fall Maudie took while in Peyton's care that landed the older girl in the hospital. Carey decides that there is nothing he can do to help Helen. Peyton and Helen have one last argument before she and Harry leave for their Florida honeymoon. The two women exchange bitter words in Helen's room. At the end of the disagreement, Peyton scratches Helen's face so deeply that she draws blood. Milton decides that he has had enough of the situation between Helen and Peyton and phones Dolly Bonner.

Chapter 6 Analysis

By this point in the narrative, the reader should be accustomed to the way Styron's novel moves in and out of past and present as though these delineations neither exist nor matter. However, in Chapter 6 comes the realization that Milton, Dolly and the others are almost to the cemetery and by extensions, the end of each of their individual stories as well. The wedding guests' reaction to Harry's being a Jew is simply a testament to the argument that Southerners are (or were at the time) extremely prejudiced toward anyone different from them. Similarly, the author holds this prejudice up as ridiculous when Edward remarks that there are some Jews who are actually decent people. Interestingly, though, Edward has a way of criticizing Southerners even though he is one himself. His and Helen's paternal grandfather attended the University of Virginia and theirs is a well-respected, established, and monied family.

Peyton and Harry's first night as a married couple closely mirrors her parents' early relationship. First of all, as a young woman barely out of her teens, Helen Loftis was wary of Milton's penchant for alcohol even before they were married. Had Helen paid closer attention to her misgivings and acted according to her better judgment told her, perhaps she and Milton would have never married. This is also the case with Peyton and Harry. Aboard the ferry, Peyton criticizes Harry for cautioning her not to drink too much, in the same way that Helen cautioned Milton at one time. At the same time, Peyton's recriminations of her new husband echo her mother's selfish insecurities in dealing with Milton. She chastises Harry for not being available to her when she "needed" him. Peyton's resemblance to her mother is a startling indicator of exactly who she would be as their years together progress. It is not difficult to imagine Helen uttering the same words to Milton thirty years before. Accusatory, petulant, and completely oblivious of the effect of her words on Harry, Peyton's statement to Harry that she married him because she needs him echoes back to the incident with Dickie Cartwright when Peyton tells him she is unable to love.

Milton's behavior at the wedding, specifically the inappropriate kiss he bestows on his daughter, concretizes the view that Milton and Peyton's relationship is the narrative's primary relationship rather than the Loftis marriage. This does make sense, given Helen and Dolly's jealousy of Milton's attachment to his daughter and the desperation with which he attempts to cling to her even after she has left home. Also, the kiss is an indication that, even before she had grown into a woman, Milton had on some level, conscious or unconscious, sexualized his own daughter. This is reinforced by the way in which Milton stares at Peyton's bottom as she stands before the altar to be married.

Chapter 7

Chapter 7 Summary

The chapter opens with a brief history of Potter's Field in New York City. Peyton's husband Harry Miller and his best friend Lennie go out to Hart's Island where the cemetery is located to identify and claim Peyton's body after it is exhumed. Peyton has committed suicide and someone must ensure that the body is returned to Milton and Helen Loftis in Port Warwick, Virginia. Her body was taken to Potter's Field because when the police found Peyton, she was naked and when her apartment was searched, no identification was found. The narrative then recounts the story of how Harry and Peyton meet and fall in love.

The next section of this chapter is a stream-of-consciousness account of Peyton's last days in New York City. Told in her own voice, the reader is able to "hear" what goes on inside Peyton's mind. She remembers various episodes involving her lovers, and Harry and gives a look at her mental deterioration and lack of self-understanding. Peyton, by this time, has had several affairs with other men. She and Harry have separated and she is desperate to reconcile with her husband. She goes in search of her husband, who is doing his best to avoid her, and eventually finds him painting in his studio. Peyton begs Harry to take her back, but Harry has come to the end of his tether and he tells Peyton to leave. She does, and she gives the reader an account of her final slide into insanity and suicide. This portion of Chapter 7 ends with an incomplete thought, which symbolizes Peyton's taking her own life.

Milton, Helen, and the others arrive at the cemetery for Peyton's burial in the pouring rain. Dolly waits in the car, her absence unnoticed or perhaps, wished for. Inside the cemetery chapel, Milton takes Helen into another room and an argument ensues. Milton becomes hysterical and tries to strangle Helen. Carey Carr stops him from killing his wife and then runs out into the storm.

Later that same day, Ella Swan, La Ruth, Solomon and hundreds of others make their way to the riverbank to watch Daddy Faith baptize other believers. The scene is charged with electricity, but Ella's heart continues to break. She mourns Peyton's death as well as Maudie's. Most of all, she weeps for the unraveling of the entire Loftis family. Her spirits are revived and renewed, however, when she hears Daddy Faith preach about the love of God and the black community's triumph over slavery and adversity. Her faith in God is restored and her sins washed clean by Daddy Faith's powerful immersion. Finally, Ella feels the glory of Jesus as a train rumbles through Port Warwick.

Chapter 7 Analysis

Structurally, as well as in terms of interpretation and analysis, Chapter 7 is the most intricate portion of LIE DOWN IN DARKNESS. The chapter is divided into four distinct sections; each one serves as an "ending" of sorts. In the opening section, the reader witnesses evidence of Peyton Loftis's actual physical end. And it is not until her end that one learns of how her story with Harry begins. Potter's Field is a less than auspicious place for a young lady of Peyton's breeding and station. The fact that Peyton dies naked and anonymous far from home lends credence to her father's expressed fear that leaving the South is somehow dangerous, that it changes a person irreversibly. Peyton dies alone and unknown; this much is true. What is also true is that her act of suicide is completely in keeping with who the character is in life. She is willful and impetuous, especially when she drinks. Coupled with her unstable nature, Peyton is painfully aware of herself as someone who is beyond hope, much like her mother Helen.

Following the section on Potter's Field is the most revelatory portion of the novel. Here, all the sordid details of Peyton's sins are recounted for the reader. The form of these revelations is stream-of-consciousness. That is, things in this section do not necessarily flow in any kind of linear order since the events are told from a first-person perspective. In addition, the lengthy monologue serves to finally illuminate Peyton's true character: she is lost, for lack of a better word; lost to her parents, to her husband. Most importantly, however, Peyton Loftis is lost to herself. Interestingly, Peyton's thoughts at no time cast blame for her predicament on anyone other than herself. She is racked with guilt for what she has done. In some way, however, the character maintains a small amount of the innocence she had as a girl. Peyton Loftis is simply a young woman who has not observed her own family system closely enough. The mention of nymphomania immediately pathologizes Peyton's actions. It also sheds some light on what lies behind Peyton's party-girl image. The character casts herself as impulsive and out of control She remembers what it is like just after an abortion, although the word is never mentioned. This juxtaposes with Milton's experience in college when he impregnates a female student. After that episode, however, it is Milton who distances himself from the girl. In Peyton's case, though, it is she who is reluctant to resume sexual relations with Tony Cecchino.

The alarm clock and Peyton's attachment to it, are signals that the character has finally crossed over into madness.

The next part of Chapter 7 takes place at the cemetery chapel. In this case, the "end" is that of Milton and Helen's life together. Milton's violence toward his wife is the outpouring of all the frustration he has felt in his life. He is at once husband and son, attempting also to strangle his father for whom Milton has/had little or no respect. Milton's final desperate act belies the character's understanding of his wife's sickness as well as his own. His plea for reconciliation is the last act of a man who has lived the greater portion of his life with a woman he never really knew. From another perspective, it is not Helen he attempts to kill, but himself. When he says to Helen, "[W]e're both sick," he is admitting once and for all their tandem dysfunction (pg. 387). Releasing his

vitriol in this manner frees Milton up to continue his life without Helen, without Dolly, and finally — without Peyton, the real love of his life.

Ella, La Ruth and Stonewall attend Daddy Faith's "Immersion" and Ella is baptized in the river. Water is a metaphor for redemption, forgiveness, and a birthing into the world of the Holy Spirit. For instance, after Milton attempts to strangle Helen, he runs out into a thunderstorm: he is cleansed of the sin of his affair with Dolly and cleansed of his need to cling to Helen. In Ella's case, water baptism signifies her escape from her grief over Peyton's demise. Ella is the mother whose love abides and Peyton is her symbolic child. By allowing herself to be immersed by Daddy Faith, Ella, in her love for Peyton, gains absolution for the dead young woman as well.

Characters

MIlton Loftis

A mediocre lawyer at best, Milton Loftis is the product of a domineering, patrician father and a lovely, refined mother who dies much too soon. Sent to the University of Virginia at the age of 17, Milton finds the freedom of being away from his father rather burdensome and his response is to drink. By the time Milton graduates, he is a full-blown alcoholic; something which proves his physical and emotional undoing later in life. Milton Loftis and Helen Peyton Loftis have been married for over 20 years. Once quite handsome, Milton is now somewhere in his fifties and although somewhat flabby, he still cuts a decent figure even at this sad stage of his life. The love of his life is his younger daughter Peyton. He is an indulgent and sentimental father where she is concerned. Milton's relationship with his older daughter Maudie is one of considerable, tender discomfort. Peyton gives him the nickname "Bunny." Milton becomes increasingly attached to Peyton as she becomes older. Loftis maintains a lengthy on-again, off-again affair with Mrs. Dolly Bonner. Milton alternately experiences a great deal of guilt and righteous indignation about carrying on with Dolly for so long. Also, Milton's feelings about Dolly are ambivalent; part of him cannot live without her. Part of Milton Loftis wishes he had never met Dolly Bonner. In addition, he is unsure of whether or not he actually loves his wife. Over the course of time, Milton convinces himself that he does, in fact, love Helen. However, it is difficult to discern if his love is genuine or if he is simply trying to counteract the grief and loneliness that set in after Peyton takes her own life.

Helen Loftis

Born Helen Peyton, she is the daughter of an Army colonel, born into a wealthy, well-established Virginia family. When she and Milton Loftis become man and wife, Helen is just nineteen years old. Over the years, Helen becomes progressively more disillusioned with her life and the Episcopalian faith. Helen Loftis's most significant disappointment is her marriage to Milton. Helen has a deep rapport with her older daughter Maudie. However, Helen feels nothing but hatred toward Peyton. The character is jealous of the attention her daughter receives from Milton. In her later years, Helen becomes vindictive and petty. She relies on Maudie's dependence to fortify her own self-imposed martyrdom. Helen adeptly plays the role of long-suffering wife to that of Milton's as philandering husband, and there is a feeling of vindication in the unbearable hatred she feels toward Dolly Bonner for breaking up her marriage. Helen's motivation for living is to bring Milton back around to what she views as respectable sobriety. Part of her desire to control her husband is a response to the lack of control she perceives in Milton's relationship with Peyton. When Maudie dies in the hospital, Helen's world completely collapses. She refuses to forgive her husband for his indiscretion and does her best to punish him for it. Part of the punishment is Helen's

refusal to accompany Milton to the train station to receive Peyton's body. Her delight in tormenting Milton is thinly masked by her claims of love and concern.

Peyton Loftis

Milton and Helen Loftis's younger daughter. Peyton's father spoils her unabashedly, lavishing attention on the girl. MIlton's indulgence produces a reaction in Peyton which manifests itself in a constant need for male attention and approval. Peyton and her mother Helen are constantly at odds with one another. Peyton's relationship with her father is almost symbiotic in that she hides behind him and manipulates Milton emotionally through a series of acceptance-rejection behaviors. She plays Milton against Helen. Later, she rejects her father for a social life in college. The author paints a vague picture of Peyton's connection to her sister, Maudie. Peyton is ambivalent about her feelings toward Maudie. Somewhere inside her, there is genuine affection for Maudie. Conversely, Peyton's position in relation to her parents also renders Maudie somewhat secondary. At the family level, Peyton and Milton are well-aware that Maudie's care rests almost solely with Helen. The fact that Maudie is Helen's primary object of attention keeps Peyton at some distance from her older sister. Also, Peyton's relationship with her parents leaves her unable to care for herself. Even after marriage, Peyton is unaware of how to keep account of her money and she has no housekeeping skills. She is impulsive and unrepentant, blaming her irresponsibility on others' lack of understanding. In this way alone, Peyton resembles her mother. Peyton's character changes after she leaves for college. Similar to Milton's experience with alcohol, Peyton follows her father into drunkenness. However, unlike Loftis, Peyton's drinking triggers promiscuity of a sort.

Peyton is beautiful, enchanting, irresistible. Her whim is every man's fancy until a restlessness overtakes Peyton and then things change. A need for emotional entanglement and physical reassurance causes Peyton to act out sexually with a variety of men. The protracted stream-of-consciousness monologue in Chapter 7 (pps 335-387) reveals that Peyton Loftis is in a world of her own, of her own making. She puts herself in potentially dangerous sexual situations with men after which she experiences intense guilt. Peyton's drinking contributes greatly to her emotional instability. Eventually, Peyton has an abortion in New York City. This adds to her guilt and her compulsion to take emotional and sexual risks.

Maudie Loftis

Maude Loftis is Peyton's older sister by approximately one year. Maudie has difficulty with one of her legs as the result of a birth defect. Also, it is revealed through the narrative that Maudie is somewhat developmentally delayed. More often than not, Maudie can be found playing quietly somewhere out of harm's way. Helen and Ella Swan are the girl's primary caretakers. This is so because of Helen's complete lack of trust in her husband and later, Peyton. Maudie, because of her physical and mental difficulties, is especially vulnerable to the whims of others. She is her mother's favorite

and a puzzlement to her father, whom she calls "Papadaddy". Maudie's innocence balances Peyton's worldliness. The girls are not especially close; partially because of the way Helen hovers over Maudie and partially because of Maudie's inability to relate to others on other than a very superficial level. Maudie's greatest thrill is watching the mysterious Bennie perform magic tricks. When Bennie disappears, Maudie is almost inconsolable. Helen sees Bennie kiss Maudie on the cheek once and figures that this is the closest Maudie will ever come to knowing what love is. Maudie dies in hospital in Charlottesville following a fall, for which Helen blames Peyton.

Carey Carr

The Reverend Carey Carr is Helen Loftis's parish priest. Carey is a young-looking forty-two years old. The rector of St. Mark's Protestant and Episcopal Church wears glasses and is not entirely unattractive as clerics go. At seventeen, Carey, his widowed mother's only child, is sent to college at Washington and Lee University. Fancying himself a burgeoning poet, Carey has his creative hopes dashed by a formerly revered poet who is past his creative prime. Carey suffers a nervous breakdown and spends a year in a sanitarium in the Blue Ridge mountains. While in the sanitarium, Carey decides to join the clergy. His mother convinces him to take holy orders as her father had done. He meets and falls in love with Adrienne while attending seminary in Alexandria, Virginia. Approximately one year after he and Adrienne are married, Carey's mother dies. He and Adrienne have three girls.

Carey has been Helen Loftis's spiritual advisor for a number of years. Unfortunately, he spends a great deal of time simply diffusing Helen's garden variety neuroses. As time goes on, however, Carey finds Helen to be more emotionally troubled than he realized. Somehow, rather than assisting Helen in her search for connection with God, Carey becomes progressively more concerned with how lost and deluded the woman is. He questions Helen Loftis's sanity. On another level, Carey Carr is forced to re-evaluate the breadth and quality of his own faith in God. After all, he is a representative of the God he so loves and as such is expected to stand solidly in his beliefs at all times.

Ella Swan

Ella Swan has been the housekeeper for the Loftis family since Maudie and Peyton were small children. Ella is very emotionally attached to the Loftises. She remains loyal to Helen and Milton Loftis, even though she is acutely aware of the family's level of emotional dysfunction. She has a daughter named LaRuth and a grandson named Stonewall. LaRuth often assists her mother with the housework and experiences the same sense of attachment as her mother. Ella is a round, stout black woman. She is not ashamed to show her feelings or express an opinion that may be contrary to that of her employer. Oddly enough, at certain points in the narrative, Ella shows more devotion to the Loftis family than to her own family, specifically LaRuth. Because of her role in the Loftis household, Ella knows the history and all about the girls' lives and when the girls both die on different occasions, Ella's grief is almost untenable. The character has great

faith in God and relies on religion and her interactions with others in her community who believe as she does. In another way, Ella Swan believes in God by way of Daddy Faith. To Ella, Daddy Faith is representative of the glory of her God. God's reminders come from Daddy Faith's lips and Ella hangs on every word. For her, there is solace and comfort in practicing her religion. And although her heart fills with the spirit often enough, Ella Swan is not one to go over the spiritual edge.

Dolly Bonner

Dolly is about 40 years old when the novel opens. She is flirtatious and likes to go to parties. Dolly marries Sclater Bonner because he is a moneymaker and she enjoys the finer things. Dolly loves Milton Loftis deeply, even though she is threatened by the hold Peyton has over him. Additionally, Dolly bears a great deal of animosity toward Helen Loftis because, regardless of her lengthy affair with Milton, she is aware that Milton still loves his wife. Dolly is the type of woman who gets by on her looks. Milton finds her exciting because of her submissive nature. Helen finds her tacky and wanton.

Daddy Faith

An evangelical preacher and the representation of Ella Swan's unwavering faith in Jesus Christ. Daddy Faith is just that, a father, an advisor, a beacon of light for black believers. Daddy Faith is part showman, part preacher, part prestidigitator; the crowds gathered on the banks of the river all look to him as a beacon of salvation. Physically, Daddy Faith is described as "a round tub of a man" with dark black skin, a shiny bald head, and very small hands—hands the size of a child's. What he lacks in stature, however, he makes up for in compassion and panache.

Harry Miller

Peyton Loftis's young husband. Harry Miller is a Jewish man from New York. An orphan, he is a gentle soul who believes that, with the right amount of love, Peyton can be redeemed. Harry is a painter with a sensitive personality. A tall, good-looking man, Harry gets a clearer picture of what is inside Peyton when they are married at her parents' house in Port Warwick. He is patient with Peyton at first, but he soon learns that she has deeper problems than not knowing how to cook, clean, or balance a checkbook. Eventually, he tires of her altogether; her alcoholism and extramarital affairs leave him mistrustful and disillusioned.

La Ruth

Ella Swan's daughter. She helps her mother with the housework at the Loftis's every Saturday. La Ruth is a very large, clumsy, not very bright woman with glasses. Also, it seems to Milton that La Ruth is constantly complaining of one physical ailment or another. She is nowhere near as successful at dealing with her white employers as her

mother Ella. She always manages to say or do the wrong thing. La Ruth is overly emotional and almost childlike in her perceptions of life and the world. She, too, is a devotee of Daddy Faith.

Stonewall

La Ruth's son, Stonewall is four years old. No mention is ever made of the boy's father. It is obvious from the boy's coloring that his father was a white man. Stonewall is a skinny child with large chestnut-brown eyes.

Dick Cartwright

Dick Cartwright is the first of Peyton Loftis's serious boyfriends. Dickie, as she calls him, comes from a very well-to-do Virginia family. After some early childhood religious trauma, brought on by attending his grandmother's Reformed Presbyterian church, Dickie grows up to be a decent fellow of average intelligence and deep sensitivity. He, too, attends the University of Virginia. Dickie and Peyton meet while they are both studying there. He genuinely loves Peyton and is content to bear the brunt of the troubled young woman's emotional inconsistencies: "He could never tell what mood governed [Peyton's] heart" (pg. 231). Peyton often directs her rage toward Dick when she is intoxicated. Dick notices that, much too often, a "little party-party" ends up being another exercise in debauchery for the both of them (pg. 230).

Adrienne Carr

Adrienne Carr is married to the Reverend Carey Carr. Adrienne possess none of Carey's sanctimonious airs. She is extremely down-to-earth and takes pride in being an individual who speaks her mind. Adrienne resents the way in which Helen Loftis drops in on her husband for spiritual counsel whenever it she pleases. She also perceives that Helen Loftis is neither as pious nor as upstanding as she would have others in Port Warwick believe. Adrienne was educated at Bryn Mawr College and is very much a woman in her own right. Adrienne Carr has a tendency toward flippancy, which Carey readily admits bothers him to a certain extent.

Sclater Bonner

Dolly Bonner's ex-husband, "Pookie" has always been a money maker; this is the main reason Dolly marries Sclater in the first place. Pookie is affable but somewhat myopic when it comes to his wife's dalliance with Miiton Loftis. Physically, he is much rounder than Milton and his portly shape is a source of constant concern for his vain wife (now ex-wife). Pookie becomes engaged to Harriet after he and Dolly split up and he begins a new life with her in Knoxville, Tennessee.

Bennie

No one ever mentions Bennie's last name. Ella and Maudie meet Bennie one day while carrying water to soldiers who are building a barracks not far from the Loftis home. Bennie is a small man with dark, pockmarked skin. Each afternoon at three o'clock, Maudie and Ella meet Bennie near the construction site. He stands on the opposite side of the construction fence and does magic tricks for the two women who laugh like children. According to Ella, Bennie is "part colored, part Indian" (pg. 221). He wears a red shirt and his black hair is worn combed straight back, off of his face. He disappears but not before holding Maudie in his arms through the fence, and kissing her on the cheek.

Lennie

Lennie lives in New York City. He is Harry Miller's best friend. The two men met during World War II when Harry saves Lennie's life by rescuing him from the Ebro River in northern Spain during the Spanish Civil War. As a consequence of his war injuries, Lennie only has use of his right arm. As far as he is concerned, Lennie thinks his arm is a small price to pay when considering the alternative. Lennie has bright red hair and a mercurial temperament. He is a very talented illustrator. Lennie comes to care about Peyton eventually. It does not take Lennie long to discover that she is emotionally unbalanced and an alcoholic. However, it is Lennie who convinces Harry to reconcile with Peyton after her first extra-marital affair. He convinces Harry Miller that Peyton simply needs to be reassured of Harry's love and commitment to married life and to her. Also, Lennie is the person who accompanies Harry to Potter's Field to claim Peyton's body.

Lyle Barclay

Barclay drives the hearse for the local funeral home. He doubles as Mr. Casper's assistant. Barclay is young, no more than nineteen or twenty years of age. His is a slim boy with acne and the hint of a thin, wispy mustache on his top lip.

Mr. Llewellyn Casper

Mr. Casper is a funeral home employee. He also functions as the limousine driver. He is of slim build and wears glasses. The narrator describes him as someone with an air of "vigilant decorum" (pg. 11). Mr. Casper's pale freckled skin is offset by "flaming red hair" and eyes of the palest blue.

Melvin Bonner

Melvin (nicknamed "Buster") is Dolly and Pookie Bonner's only child. He is roughly the same age as Peyton.

Sylvia Mason

Sylvia Mason is a country club acquaintance of the Loftises. Sylvia has a boisterous, high-pitched laugh that is unmistakable. A relatively large woman with red hair and "plump arms", Mrs. Mason wears a number of silver bracelets on her exposed arm. Dolly Bonner finds her to be crass and obstreperous. Nonetheless, it is Sylvia Mason whom Milton allows to comfort him when he first finds out that Peyton has died.

Charlie La Farge

Sixteen year-old Charlie is just one in a series of men who fall in love with Peyton Loftis. He keeps her on a pedestal, protecting her honor — at least in terms of his sexual fantasies. Peyton is the only female Charlie dreams of marrying. Charlie, according to his mother, is a serious boy with a sober temperament who will probably attend Virginia Polyechnic Institute after completing high school. Like any adolescent boy, Charlie is most concerned with losing his virginity. He is a good-looking boy who inherited his mother's easygoing demeanor. His chaste encounters with Peyton often leave Charlie frustrated and confused.

Albert Berger

A friend of Harry and Lennie's. Albert is an intellectual who lives off of a healthy annuity and throws parties every Saturday night in his Washington Mews apartment. Harry does not find Albert to be all that interesting. Albert is pale, white, and very thin. He also has extremely bad eyes. Harry and Peyton meet for the first time at one of Albert's parties.

Anthony (Tony) Cecchino

One of the New York City men with whom Peyton has an affair. Tony is unrefined and ill-mannered. He works as a milkman. Tony is gruff and aggressive. He is the complete opposite of her father and the other Southern men she knows. He has dark hair and a brusque way of handling Peyton.

Objects/Places

Birds

In Chapter 7, birds symbolize the men with whom Peyton Loftis has been intimate. Many of the birds she perceives as flightless. This could indicate the futility of guilt, or the young woman's inability to contain her unpredictable sexual compulsion. At one point, Peyton begins to hallucinate; she sees silent birds following her in the subway station. Also, birds serve as a reminder of the character's sense of disgust and self-loathing: "Guilt is the thing with feathers" (pg. 352).

Trains

The train travel featured in LIE DOWN IN DARKNESS gives the impression of time spread out and slow moving. Through the window of a train, one is able to visually take in one's surroundings. Also, the slower, more deliberate pace of a train counteracts the automobile travel featured in the story. Trains are also emblematic of the progression of human life. All journeys have distinct beginnings and unique endings. Also, trains suggest a network of routes and destinations all connected within one system. For Milton and Helen, connections to one another and their children are at the center of their life together. Their personal and social networks also include Dolly Bonner and her husband Pookie, as well as Carey Carr and various alumni of the University of Virginia.

Christian Faith

Carey Carr, Helen Loftis, and Ella Swan each have a different experience of Christianity. Carey, once a faithful, obedient man of God, comes to question the ability of God when he encounters Helen's true darkness. Similarly, Helen has reservations about God's investment in her individual life. Conversely, Ella Swan is absolutely secure in her faith. Ella places great trust in God and uses belief as a place to deposit her grief and feelings of not completely understanding the ways of the world. For Ella, there is present in Christianity an air of the mystical that Carey and Helen are now much too cynical to recognize. Theirs is a partially intellectual faith, as Carey and Helen Loftis have taken for themselves the luxury of thinking about God; whereas, Ella Swan's faith is grounded in innocence and pure trust.

Potter's Field

Located on Hart's Island in Long Island Sound, just east of the Bronx, New York City. This is the location of the New York City cemetery where the anonymous, unclaimed dead are buried. Peyton's body is transported to Potter's Field after her suicide. Harry Miller and his friend Lennie go together to Potter's Field to pick up Peyton's body before sending her home to Port Warwick.

University of Virginia

Milton and Peyton Loftis's alma mater. Helen Loftis's grandfather also attended the university. Fraternity and sorority life figure prominently in the college experience in this narrative. The University is also the place where father and daughter launch their addiction to alcohol. The University of Virginia is also symbolic of a time in Milton's life when he was accepted and acceptable. Milton's drunken escapade on the day of the football game only serve as a reminder of how low the character finds himself now that he is just beyond middle-aged. As a younger man, being social and drinking (often too much) were activities that enabled Milton to fit in. Presently, even with his fraternity brothers, Milton is something of a sad joke.

The Funeral Home

In Chapter 7, Milton and Helen bring Peyton to her final resting place. As it happens, this is also where Milton and Helen's relationship unravels for the last time. It is suitable that the Loftises should come to the end of their life together while they commemorate their daughter's demise. Burying Peyton, they bury themselves as well.

The Hearse

Notable because of its temperamental nature. On the day Peyton's body arrives, the hearse breaks down several times between the station and the funeral parlor. There is an absurdity about the hearse malfunctioning that lends a comedic air to the narrative.

The Alarm Clock

Peyton purchases the clock and later becomes obsessed with living in the clock with Harry. Wanting to escape her present life and move into the small world of the clock indicates that the character is overwhelmed by the enormity of what is "real." Peyton seeks to contain her life with Harry by transferring their relationship into a well-defined space which, to her, seems much more easily managed. Furthermore, living in the clock with her husband would allow Peyton to avoid the temptation to act out promiscuously. Peyton wants and needs to exert control over herself and her physical surroundings.

Daddy Faith's Raft

Daddy Faith's raft is a floating platform with a small stage in the center, surrounded by a "golden damask curtain" (pg. 392). What makes the raft singular and spectacular to Ella and the other members of the gathering is the way in which it is adorned. The symbols which are embroidered on the fine gold cloth represent a number of divergent philosophical belief systems and religious traditions. The symbols catch the sunlight, mesmerizing the crowd with their bold strangeness. Something in these decorations

suggests that Daddy Faith draws his power from many different sources, and that as such, he is somehow supernaturally in tune with the entire universe of spiritual experience and mystery.

The Confederate Flag

The symbol of the old American South and a last vestige of what had once been a country within a country. In this narrative, the Confederate flag is reduced to little more than something for Pookie Bonner to wave over his head at the Virginia-Georgia football game. Bonner's decision to use the flag in such a way provides a commentary on how, in 1943, something was changing about the south. It signals the passage from one era into the next. Milton's era, one of gentility and southern pride, slips away making room for Sclater Bonner and the younger set; moneymakers and dreamers alike.

Social Concerns And Themes

Unlike The Confessions of Nat Turner (1967) and Sophie's Choice (1979), in which the characters are victims of the dehumanizing systems (slavery, Nazism) they tried to fight (Nat Turner) or cheat (Sophie), Styron's first novel deals with the self- induced, hopeless suffering of one upper-middle-class Virginia family. Yet Lie Down in Darkness, despite its exclusive focus on one family's spiritual and moral disintegration, is Styron's most pessimistic and depressing novel. It offers no hope, no redemption reinforcing the novel's theme: the family's inability to love, to overcome their selfishness, to see beyond their petty but deeply rooted misunderstandings. In a way, the Loftises' emotional immaturity, their crippled lives, illustrate the sources of the larger problems afflicting Milton and Helen's prewar generation — lack of ideals, isolation, moral stagnation, intolerance, and indifference. Their meaningless social rituals awkwardly cover up their failure to communicate with one another and the outside world. Emotionally infantile, they escape into alcohol, promiscuity, cold self-righteousness, insanity, and suicide, unable to simply reach out for each other. Peyton's suicide gives the novel its tragic dimension, introducing the theme of guilt and parental responsibility.

Techniques

Like all of Styron's novels, Lie Down in Darkness has an intricate, dramatically justified narrative structure. Although the point of view is omniscient (except for a second-person opening), Styron cleverly limits it by entering, with smooth, natural transitions, the minds of his principle characters, including those who play a significant role in the life of the Loftis family.

Styron's skill allows him to engage the reader quite intimately without forcing the author to identify with any of his characters.

Quite original also is Styron's treatment of time. Objectively, the novel's action covers the events of just one day — the day of Peyton's funeral, from the time her remains arrive by train until, after some unexpected misadventures, she is buried. In a sense, then, the novel begins at the end and moves forward through many flashbacks. The funeral provides only a compositional frame while the plot deals with the exploration of the fragments of the past to explain the characters' psyches.

Instead of building the climax around the old question of what happened, Styron involves the reader in the equally if not more dramatic how and why it happened.

Themes

The South

Styron's novel is set in Virginia in the 1940s. All throughout the narrative are references to the Confederacy and a way of life which ended with the American Civil War. LIE DOWN IN DARKNESS paints the South as a place of which its inhabitants are fiercely proud and yet somewhat humbled by the knowledge that times are changing. Relationships between blacks and whites in the novel very closely resemble the relationships between masters and slaves. The only difference is that in 1943, blacks are paid wages for attending to the needs of their white employers. There is also, however, a sense of stability within the black characters which does not seem to exist in the whites in the story. Ella Swan, La Ruth, and the others who go to watch the "immersion" are aware of their status as a community; a cohesive group. On the other hand, Loftis and his family do enjoy a certain amount of social status, but in terms of actually connecting with one another, the only examples given are fraternities and the Daughters of the American Revolution. Milton and those in his social set have a deeply ingrained sense of history as Southerners; that is to say, they set great store by ancestry and bloodlines. To them, it matters who one's parents are and which town one grows up in. Prejudice is still very much alive in the South of LIE DOWN IN DARKNESS. This is evidenced by some characters' reactions to Peyton marrying a Jew.

Absolution (Forgiveness)

Two primary characters in LIE DOWN IN DARKNESS are in search of absolution of one kind or another. Milton and Peyton both want to be delivered of their emotional and mental difficulties and forgiven for their supposed wrongs. For Milton Loftis, momentary absolution means Helen agreeing to accompany him to the station to retrieve Peyton's body. He longs for Helen to look past his drinking and his affair with Dolly Bonner. For a time, Milton convinces himself that he and Helen belong together. In his grief and guilt, he attempts to persuade Helen that there is still love between them and that it is their responsibility to comfort one another now that their children have passed on. By the close of the novel, though, Milton is only concerned with ridding himself of Helen permanently.

Similarly, Peyton seeks to be absolved for her indiscretions as well. The character's expectation is that everyone in her life will treat her like Milton treats her. This is not the case. As an adult, Peyton finds herself constantly asking he men in her life, including her husband Harry, to forgive her indiscretions, sexual and otherwise. After each episode of impulsive behavior or verbally lashing out, Peyton looks to have her sin wiped away by the closest man. Like a child, she needs the constant reassurance of a male figure to validate her existence.

Disappointment

Disappointment defines the Loftis family. Milton's father is disappointed in him for not living up to the older man's expectations. Milton never pays his father any mind when his father tries to impart the wisdom of his experience. Eventually, Milton becomes a disappointment to himself and his wife. Helen notices that Milton has a drinking problem even before they are married. Helen's marriage is a disappointment to her. The character is young and naive but very much in love with Milton at the time of their wedding. Helen never gets over the hurt Milton causes her by having an affair with Dolly Bonner. Helen is extremely disappointed in her husband's relationship with Peyton. Peyton's father disappoints her at the football game festivities. Since she is away at college, there is already an inevitable distance between Peyton and Milton. When Milton's drunkenness embarrasses himself and his daughter, Peyton comes to realize that Milton is nothing more than a tired old man trying to cling to the past. Peyton was once, gladly, Milton's golden child. His debauched state and the shameless inebriated fawning bring Peyton face to face with a part of herself and she draws further away from Milton.

Questioning Faith

Description

Style

Point of View

For the most part, Styron employs a third person omniscient narrator in LIE DOWN IN DARKNESS. The only exception to this is a lengthy stream-of-consciousness passage narrated by Peyton in Chapter 7 (pps. 335-386). Stream-of-consciousness refers to the style of the narration. Using the monologue technique gives Peyton Loftis a chance to speak for herself, as it were. One thought does not necessarily follow another in a logical manner and the language can often be more imagistic than that of an ordinary monologue. For instance, Peyton's monologue often refers to different types of birds. This may seem random to the reader, but the birds themselves have a special significance in Peyton's mind. Basically, the reader is presented with what goes on in the character's mind without censorship. Interestingly, Peyton's motivations and neuroses are revealed in this portion of Chapter 7, and it becomes clearer to the reader why the character behaves the way she does. In the novel's remaining chapters, Peyton's personality and motivation are determined for the reader by other characters' observations and reactions. None of the remaining characters in the novel are given this treatment. Peyton's inner landscape is more complex than the other characters around her even realize. Their deep lack of understanding makes the circumstances of Peyton's death all the more tragic.

Setting

LIE DOWN IN DARKNESS takes place in the American south. The Loftis family lives in Port Warwick, and most of the action takes place in the small, bustling town. Another prominent location is New York City, where Peyton lives with her husband Harry Miller. Port Warwick and New York City represent contrasting states of being for Peyton. There is safety in a town the size of Port Warwick; everyone knows everyone else. There is a feeling of consistency and history in Port Warwick that is not found in New York City. The sheer size of the city of New York absorbs its inhabitants, rendering them anonymous except to close friends. In Port Warwick, the Loftises are members of the country club. They enjoy a certain amount of social status because of Milton's profession and Helen's inherited money. Social strata are constructed and viewed differently in New York, in that distinctions between people are made based on criteria other than skin color or even socio-economic standing. The city is teeming with people of various ethnicities and political sensibilities, like Harry Miller's eclectic group of friends. And whereas home does symbolize at least familiarity and continuity, New York City is the site of change and confusion. The city itself finally proves to be as unpredictable as Peyton's mental state.

Language and Meaning

William Styron's language and word choices may seem somewhat high-toned. The author's use of more formal words and phrases is primarily linked to the region where the narrative takes place. For example, the author uses a wide variety of words and phrases from black vernacular as voiced by Ella, LaRuth and the other African-American characters. One character says "fambly" instead of "family" and another uses "po' chile" for "poor child." Similarly, other characters in LIE DOWN IN DARKNESS use words which connect them to another time. Page 14 features Milton remembering one of his father's "speeches." The older man's vocabulary includes words like abjure and filial; words that Helen and Milton would never use in conversation with their children in 1951. Such words, spoken by a parent to a child, register as less than emotional and quite condescending. Obviously, Milton's father has no idea how to communicate effectively with his son. Another situation in which language serves to further delineate character is Peyton's monologue in Chapter 7. The way in which Peyton's thoughts and feelings flow provide a juxtaposition to her outer appearance. Based on her looks alone, one could assume that Peyton Loftis would have a relatively carefree, happy life. Seeing her mind working on paper provides another view of the character.

Structure

LIE DOWN IN DARKNESS has a fairly straightforward structure. There are seven untitled chapters. Chapters 5, 6 and 7 are more substantive in length. While there is nothing unusual about the formatting of the other chapters, Chapter 7 is divided into four distinct sections. The first section introduces the reader to Potter's Field in New York City. Some historical background is given as to the burial ground's beginnings. The second portion of Chapter 7 is devoted entirely to Peyton. This particular section spans over fifty pages. Being able to "hear" what Peyton is thinking puts the remainder of the novel into perspective. Until this point, the reader is only given information as to Helen and Milton's states of mind. In the first six chapters, Peyton is reacting to the other characters around her but this is accomplished without revealing her inner workings. The next to the last section of Chapter 7 is exactly a page and a half in length. This, effectively, functions as the official "end" of the Loftis family narrative. Interestingly, the final chapter ends with Ella, LaRuth, Stonewall, and the rest of the black community attending Daddy Faith's revival meeting at the water's edge. This is a bold choice for the author to make. Ending the novel with Ella Swan and her family rather than Milton Loftis and his family prompts the reader to look beyond the narrative proper for meaning. In other words, there is something outside the story of Milton and Helen and their girls that the author is attempting to convey by way of Ella and the riverfront gathering.

Quotes

"He felt tricked and defeated and it seemed to him that the bigness of his sorrow was too much to bear" (Chapter 1, pg. 14).

"[K]eep your chin up and your kilts down and let the wind blow" (Chapter 1, pg. 15).

"Perhaps that's good for a man — finally to know what suffering is, to know what a woman somehow knows almost from the day she's born" (Chapter 1, pg. 26).

"Ah, that sorrow hurries like the wind" (Chapter 1, pg. 31).

"[S]uccessful as he had been for many hours in forgetting all except the loss of her, she came back now to him swiftly, the thought of her exploding against his consciousness like a fist" (Chapter 1, pg, 37).

"Maybe that's the key to happiness — being sort of dumb, not wanting to know any of the answers" (Chapter 1, pg. 39).

"She made a grab for him, laughing; her mouth was big, open; round with wild delight" (Chapter 2, pg. 42).

"He could almost see it: a row of maple chairs, young women with bad breath and half-moons of sweat beneath their armpits, a basement somewhere smelling of stale leaking water and moldy religion" (Chapter 2, pg. 54).

"[M]aybe because on such occasions, in an atmosphere of hate and sorrow, there is still a guardian breath of love that hovers in the air" (Chapter 3, pg. 92).

"[T]he pines seemed to shake and tremble but the hawk vanished, sailing up over the roof of a filing station, a dusky shadow, wings outspread like something crucified" (Chapter 4, pg. 108).

"[H]is two little girls were going through their year of childhood ailments, and had exchanged diseases in the careless way of children [...]" (Chapter 4, pg. 109).

"Fleas and spiders, the underground chill. It was easy: though she couldn't see them, she sensed a trembling acquiescence, the sweet convulsive entanglement" (Chapter 4, pg. 116).

"His glass fell soundlessly to the lawn and the ice cubes which she stepped on, as she ran, glowed like diamonds in the grass" (Chapter 4, pg. 125).

"Helen, doing most of the talking, thought pleasantly of her particular hatred for this woman" (Chapter 4, pg. 136).

"I will fold up my mind like a leaf and drift on this stream over the brink. Which will be soon, and then the dark, and then be done with this ugliness [...]" (Chapter 4, pg. 149).

"[T]he aerial melody of departed gaiety, as fragile as the smoke from burning dance cards, candles, midnight fires, might still be heard, very sad and distant, if you closed your eyes and let the years fall away" (Chapter 5, pg. 154).

"Nothing sends so chill a wind over conviviality as the knowledge of some approaching domestic unpleasantness, so the guests drifted out, leaving behind them, to sparkle with rainbow hues in the twilight, their empty eggnog glasses" (Chapter 5, pg. 157).

"His beautiful, gay party had been instantly shattered, like a Christmas-tree globe trampled by wayward feet" (Chapter 5, pg. 157).

"[R]ed fire, reflected from the snow, the sinking sun, had fallen upon the bed, and her folded arms seemed to gather this light to her breast like roses. Motionless, she lay in an attitude of death, a crimson marble sepulcher" (Chapter 5, pg. 157).

"Again, the crimson glow returned to envelop her, but it was almost night' light in the sky above the bay swam toward darkness, and so touched her body, the room, his still outstretched hand, with the softest shade of blue" (Chapter 5, pg. 159).

"Even in autumn, season of death, time brings forgetfulness to thoughts of death, lost loves and lost hopes" (Chapter 5, pg. 188).

"Was this, after twenty years not of love but only a sort of sad, evasive fondness, all one felt — neither fear not grief but just a wistfulness, a need to be left alone?" (Chapter 5, pg. 192).

"[L]ove should be just a sound which rose like a kite through long-ago darkness — a word, a laugh, a sigh, something like that, and the noise of sagging springs and the rustle of half-drawn blinds" (Chapter 5, pg. 195).

"He was a large enthusiastic man with fawn-colored pouches beneath his eyes and an indecisive mustache which looked as if it had been sprinkled on [...]" (Chapter 5, pg. 196).

"They were painted with fire, like those fallen children who live and breathe and soundlessly scream, and whose souls blaze forever" (Chapter 5, pg. 236).

"A bachelor at sixty-eight and an uneasy drinker, Holcomb was seized with an itchy, reminiscent lust whenever he drank too much, whenever young girls were around — the younger the better — and this fact saddened him" (Chapter 6, pg. 301).

"Wanting to bite his tongue off at that, but compelled to go on and on laboring the subject more drunkenly with each moment, a man tied to a runaway cannon" (Chapter 6, pg. 306).

"Had he had a gun he felt he might have shot Helen then, watched her fall slain and bleeding among the guests and the shattered glasses and the crumpled pink napkins" (Chapter 6, pg. 308).

"Guilt is the thing with feathers, they came back with a secret rustle, preening their flightless wings and I didn't want to think" (Chapter 7, pg. 352).

"Perhaps I shall rise at another time, though I lie down in darkness and have my light in ashes" (Chapter 7, pg. 386).

Key Questions

Lie Down in Darkness presents a special challenge to discussion leaders.

The best approach to discussing and understanding the novel may be through its characterizations, rather than its structure or style. Milton is an interesting example of a man who seems to have goodness in him but who exercises very poor judgment.

What attracted him to Helen, a nasty woman with a bitter, hateful outlook?

Why do his efforts to make Peyton's life a good one fail? If Peyton is such a smart person, why does she give up on life rather than try to understand her past and come to terms with it? The twisted family life of the Loftises creates opportunities for exploring questions of taking responsibility for one's own life, of what one's responsibilities to the family are, and to what degree a family tragedy is shared by all family members.

1. Are there any redeeming features of the Loftis family?

2. Is Milton a good or bad man?

What are his moral choices? Does he make any good ones?

3. How is Helen's state of mind displayed? Is she truly mentally ill?

4. How much of the characters' lives are determined by their parents? Do parents really have the kind of influence Lie Down in Darkness suggests they have?

5. Why does Peyton's marriage not save her?

6. Why are blacks presented as they are in Lie Down in Darkness? Do they serve any purpose in the narrative?

7. How effective is Styron's style?

Does it draw you, as the reader, into the narrative?

8. Compare Lie Down in Darkness to Faulkner's As I Lay Dying. What does their structure have in common? Do they share tone and point of view, or are there significant differences between their portraits of people?

9. The backwards structure of Lie Down in Darkness is shared by later novels by Styron. Trace the development of Styron's use of memories and retrospectives in his fiction, making special stops at The Confessions of Nat Turner and Sophie's Choice. Does its use improve from one novel to the next?

Why does Styron favor the backwards structure? Does it serve any special purposes?

10. A family's disintegration is often found in fiction by Southern writers?

What are some reasons why this is a prevailing theme in Southern literature.

Topics for Discussion

There are two distinct "father" figures in LIE DOWN IN DARKNESS: Milton Loftis and Daddy Faith. How does Styron's portrayal of Daddy Faith as a kind and loving father contrast with the author's representation of Milton Loftis?

In Chapter 7, Styron employs both a third person omniscient narrator and a lengthy "stream of consciousness" monologue written from Peyton Loftis' point of view. Using the text as a guide, explain the way in which the monologue reveals insights into Peyton's inner workings. What does the reader learn from the monologue about Peyton's relationship with Milton?

The opening paragraph of LIE DOWN IN DARKNESS is one complete sentence. What does this indicate about the pace of life in the American South? Choose one or two descriptive passages from the paragraph and explain what makes this paragraph "cinematic" in nature.

LIE DOWN IN DARKNESS was published in 1951. Examine the relationship between blacks and whites in 1943 in the novel. Next, compare and contrast the Helen-Peyton relationship with Ella Swan's relationship to her daughter LaRuth. What, if any, are the similarities between the two mother/daughter sets? Can a case be made that Ella Swan is more attached to the Loftis family than her own? Cite specific examples from the text to reinforce the points being made.

What is the basis of Carey Carr's struggle to help Helen Loftis? Specifically, what is it about their relationship that challenges his faith?

Citing specific examples from the text, make a case for the claim that the final few pages of LIE DOWN IN DARKNESS are devoted to two distinct representations of "family." What would be the author's reason for ending the novel not with the Loftises but with Ella Swan and her family attending Daddy Faith's waterfront revival? How can the novel's end serve as a commentary on race and family structure?

In Chapter 4 (pg. 111), Adrienne Carr asserts that "Helen Loftis is a nest of little hatreds." What image does this statement conjure in the mind of the reader? What, exactly, are the "little hatreds" Adrienne refers to?

Discuss the following passage in terms of what it tells the reader about the Loftises marriage: "And without shame, in a naked movement of intimacy, [Helen's] hand had stolen out upon the sunlit satin pillow toward Loftis', lay lightly for a moment upon his pink, outstretched, unprotesting palm, and squeezed it until the skin became positively bloodless" (Chapter 6, pg. 247).

Consider the context of the situation and explain what is meant by the statement "[T]he wages of sin is not death, but isolation [...]" (Chapter 6, pg. 249).

Re-read Peyton's stream of consciousness monologue in Chapter 7 (pps. 335-386). Why does Peyton talk of sex and guilt in terms of birds?

Literary Precedents

Although its theme is universal rather than regional, both structurally and stylistically Lie Down in Darkness belongs to the Southern tradition. The novel's ornate diction owes much to Thomas Wolfe. Its use of interior monologue in Peyton's section recalls Faulkner's The Sound and the Fury (1929). The novel's composition, on the other hand, is heavily indebted to Faulkner's novel, As I Lay Dying (1930).

Critics have also pointed out that Milton's predicament and character resemble that of Dick Diver in Scott Fitzgerald's Tender Is the Night (1934).

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