

Lisa, Bright and Dark Study Guide

Lisa, Bright and Dark by John Neufeld

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Plot Summary

Lisa Shilling and her friends live on Long Island, New York. Lisa and her friends M.N. Fickett, Elizabeth Frazer and Betsy Goodman are all in high school, having the time of their lives. Lisa, Betsy, M.N. and to a certain extent Elizabeth are all girls whose lives have been comfortable for the most part. They are friends because of proximity. All four of the girls go to the same high school. They are young, happy and vibrant. Lisa, Betsy and the girls are concerned with girlish things: boyfriends, fashion, celebrities and movies, even current events. Little else matters. It is the sixties and there are more questions than answers available to young people. The Vietnam war is in the news and there is talk of free love and equal rights for all people. M.N. and the others can tell that they live in an exciting world, even if they do have to watch it from Long Island.

Things change, though, when Lisa starts acting strangely. It begins with mood swings, but soon Lisa becomes violent and withdrawn. All the while, Lisa pleads with her disaffected parents to find a doctor for her to talk to. When Betsy discovers Lisa poking holes in her arm with a pin, she knows something is terribly wrong. The girls do all they can to help their friend. They research various mental health conditions and work to find a diagnosis for Lisa, but the problem is more complex than they know. Elizabeth is the only one of the girls who is less than excited about helping Lisa fight off disaster. Elizabeth and Lisa share a secret, which puts Elizabeth in a strong position to help Lisa. The girls begin reaching out to anyone in authority who will listen to their story. The adults around them do not seem to want to take any responsibility for what is obviously a serious situation. They turn to people in authority at their high school and they turn to their own parents because Lisa's mother and father refuse to hear about how ill their daughter has become. After numerous conversations with the school guidance counselor and various parents, one of the friends has an idea that sets things in motion to help Lisa Shilling stay healthy and balanced.

But Lisa continues to fall apart and, more than once, Betsy, M.N., and Elizabeth are shaken to the core. After awhile, the girls find that curing Lisa on their own is more than they are equipped to handle. Then, there is the matter of Lisa herself. No one is sure that Lisa wants her friends' help but she has no one else to turn to. Lisa's cries for help become louder and louder until she decides to end her life once and for all.



Chapters 1 - 5 (Pages 9 - 33)

Chapters 1 - 5 (Pages 9 - 33) Summary

Lisa, Bright and Dark by John Neufeld is that story of one girl's journey into mental illness. Lisa Shilling tells her parents that she is going out of her mind. Her parents, as usual, chastise Lisa for being inappropriate or dramatic. Eventually, Lisa's behavior becomes more bizarre and three of her school friends decide that she needs help right away. Betsy, M.N., and the beautiful Elizabeth Frazer undertake Lisa's treatment and soon find that they are out of their depth and that Lisa is almost out of her mind.

In chapter one, Mary Nell Fickett (also known as M.N.) is eating dinner with Lisa Shilling, Tracy (her younger sister) and Lisa's parents, Mr. and Mrs. Shilling. Lisa tells everyone at the table that she thinks she is losing her mind. Lisa's mother tells her that she is being rude. Mrs. Shilling says that there is a more appropriate time for such discussions. Lisa pleads with her father to find a medical doctor or a psychiatrist for her to talk to. Lisa hears voices in her head. It is obvious to M.N. (and perhaps to Tracy) that Lisa is under some stress over her mental state. Mr. and Mrs. Shilling are not receptive to Lisa's plea for help.

This portion of the story is told from the perspective of an unidentified narrator. At one point, the narrator says, "Mary Nell said that Lisa just sat and stared at her father as he went away" (p. 11). The person narrating this section must have been a confidant of Mary Nell's.

Later that evening, M.N. listens outside Lisa's bedroom door. M.N. hears Lisa banging her head against the headboard.

In chapter two, Betsy Goodman is the narrator. Betsy lives on Long Island in New York. She does not especially consider herself attractive, but she is aware that looks are not everything. Betsy is just average. Betsy and M.N. are both friends of Lisa Shilling. However, Betsy does not know Lisa well at all.

Betsy and M.N. are the best of friends. They socialize together often and Betsy gives M.N. advice about boys. M.N. is a progressive thinker, in Betsy's estimation. Betsy says that M.N. has a crush on a boy named Brian Morris, "the cutest boy in [their] class" (p. 14). For a time, Brian Morris had been Lisa Shilling's boyfriend.

The girls' other friend is Elizabeth Frazer. Elizabeth is blond, cool, and intelligent and comes from a very wealthy family. Elizabeth is considered a new girl since she has only lived in the neighborhood for a year and a half. Betsy thinks Brian Morris looks like Paul Newman.

Betsy's narration continues in chapter three. Betsy remembers getting to know Lisa Shilling better. Lisa and Brian had been a very popular couple in high school. Originally, Lisa was M.N.'s friend and they would go on double-dates. M.N. would tell Betsy



everything that happened so Betsy knew of Lisa before she ever actually met her. Even in the beginning, Betsy thought Lisa Shilling was somewhat peculiar.

Betsy remembers hearing about a party at M.N.'s house to celebrate Brian and Lisa's first anniversary. In the middle of the party, Lisa stormed out of the room suddenly. Eventually, she sat in a dark corner all by herself and could not be persuaded to return to the party.

In chapter four, Betsy tells of Lisa Shilling's strange behavior. Suddenly, the girls notice that Lisa is isolating herself from Brian and others. Brian speaks to M.N. about Lisa but M.N. is unable to help.

It seems to Betsy as though Lisa is two different people. Soon, Betsy and Lisa's other friends at school would be able to tell Lisa's "black" days from her "bright" days (p. 21).

One day, M.N. claims that Brian Morris made a pass at her. Betsy is skeptical but M.N. swears it is true. Brian Morris is confused and bewildered by Lisa's behavior and he eventually breaks up with Lisa.

On her good days, Lisa talks about splitting up with Brian as nothing more than a learning experience. On her bad days, Lisa does not say anything to anyone.

One day, M.N. and Lisa are late for their social sciences exam and Betsy is sent to find them. Betsy enters a classroom and sees Lisa Shilling under the teacher's desk. Lisa is poking herself in the arm with a pin. M.N. hands Lisa small pieces of tissue to soak up the blood from the pinpricks. Betsy immediately runs for help.

In chapter five, Mr. Jeremy Bernstein is introduced. Lisa's strange antics hardly cause a ripple among her family and the school administration.

Betsy claims that Mr. Bernstein did not handle Lisa's case very well. Bernstein actually has very little training working with young people like Lisa. Basically, Mr. Bernstein says that Lisa is suffering too much tension because of grades and the recent split from Brian Morris. When he spoke to Lisa's parents, Bernstein did not mention anything being seriously wrong with Lisa.

Mr. and Mrs. Shilling send Lisa to Florida for six weeks. Lisa's parents also send her to Florida alone. Betsy thinks Lisa's parents are "phonies" (p. 29). Betsy says that Mr. and Mrs. Shilling hear what they want to hear and ignore everything else. According to Betsy, Mr. Shilling is fake and flashy. She says that Mr. Shilling tries too hard to be clever. Mrs. Shilling, on the other hand, is ostentatious and talks funny.

Neither Mrs. Shilling nor her husband pays Lisa and Tracy much attention. Betsy says that Mrs. Shilling tries to appear "very rich and very snooty" (p. 30).

Betsy observes that Elizabeth Frazer's parents are the exact opposite of Mr. and Mrs. Shilling. Mr. Frazer reminds Betsy of Franklin D. Roosevelt because of the way he relates to other people so generously. Betsy greatly admires Mr. Frazer.



Mrs. Frazer, though, is very busy keeping track of two homes. Betsy finds that Mrs. Frazer is usually very distracted.

Betsy's father, Mr. Goodman, is more mild-mannered than Mr. Shilling or Mr. Frazer. Mr. Goodman works as an insurance agent. Betsy feels closer to her father than her mother. Betsy's mother is always preoccupied with a club or an organization. Betsy's mother is very community-minded. Betsy has a younger brother named Ben.

Mary Nell Fickett's father is a clergyman. Betsy says that Reverend Fickett is good "at being enthusiastic" (p. 32). She thinks Mary Nell's mother is "a dream" (p. 32).

For a short time, Betsy and M.N. wondered if perhaps Lisa's parents and Mr. Bernstein might be right. Maybe Lisa did just need to rest and clear her head.

Betsy goes on to say that when Lisa Shilling returned from Florida, things got worse.

Chapters 1 - 5 (Pages 9 - 33) Analysis

The novel begins in an unusual place. The dinner scene and what happens later are part of someone's memory — probably Mary Nell's. Next, the story is told by someone who heard about it from Mary Nell herself. This seems not to fit with the remainder of the narrative. It does, however, present the problem of the unreliable narrator. That is to say, by using an unknown narrator, the author may wish to somehow call perception into question. Who remembers what becomes as important as what actually happens.

The first five chapters are responsible for introducing the main characters. Also, Betsy's narration gives thorough descriptions of those who are associated with the girls. Betsy's perspective on her friends' family members are humorous. Also, Betsy's descriptions are very much in keeping with what a sixteen year-old girl might say even today.

What is established immediately is that Lisa Shilling has some sort of mental problem. This is evident because of her outburst at the dinner table and the episode in which Mary Nell hears Lisa beating her head against the headboard in her bedroom. These examples also prove that the novel begins after Lisa has begun to have trouble with her feelings and behaviors.

It is also apparent that Lisa and her parents do not have a very strong or close relationship. Mr. and Mrs. Shilling are in denial and they are collectively very stubborn. In fact, their unwillingness to recognize Lisa's problems foreshadow a suicide attempt later in the narrative.

In chapter two, Betsy Goodman is established as the narrator for the novel. Betsy is a minor character until she begins narrating. Betsy works her way to the center of the narrative once she gets involved with M.N. and Lisa Shilling. Betsy becomes a kind of co-protagonist with Lisa. Betsy makes an excellent narrative choice. If the story had been told from the perspective of another character, the reader would not have as clear a view as Becky's. The girls are not close at the beginning of the novel; therefore, Becky



has no preconceived notions to influence the story. Her perspective is more accurate because it is more immediate.

When Betsy and M.N. in Mr. Milne's classroom, the severity of Lisa's illness registers with her and her mind begins to work overtime. Betsy and the other girls are sheltered from mental illness people with emotional problems. This is probably the most significant thing to happen to Betsy and M.N., although not necessarily to Elizabeth.

The parents are introduced in the first few chapters. Again, Betsy's perspective is the source of some very valuable information on Lisa's parents as well as M.N.s father and Elizabeth's parents also. The girls' families are all quite different. This fact does not prevent the girls from doing as much as they can to help Lisa. Class is not so much a matter of behavior as it is a matter of appearance for some of the characters.



Chapters 6 - 10 (Pages 33 - 60)

Chapters 6 - 10 (Pages 33 - 60) Summary

In chapter six, Lisa Shilling returns home from Florida and has a rough first day back at school. After a short while, though, Lisa seems to return to her old self.

Then, things begin to change. Lisa slips back into her dark self and Betsy and M.N. reluctantly decide to step in to help Lisa somehow.

Betsy says that she can see the hysteria in Lisa's eyes. Finally, Lisa settles back into her pattern of odd behavior; talking in a whisper, isolating herself from her friends; ignoring people. M.N. comes to the conclusion that since Lisa's parents and the guidance counselor Mr. Bernstein are not really helping, she and Betsy will have to tell the adults the truth about Lisa.

M.N. decides to have a word with Mr. and Mrs. Shilling. Betsy will talk to Mr. Bernstein.

In chapter seven, M.N. and Betsy put their plan to save Lisa into effect. After school, M.N. goes to the Shilling home to speak to Lisa's parents. Betsy speaks to Mr. Bernstein. Bernstein tells Betsy that he knows Lisa's mental health is collapsing. He refuses to contact Lisa's parents because he knows they will not trust or believe anything he says. Bernstein is hesitant to get involved in Lisa Shilling's business. He tells Betsy that going to the principal would only make Mr. and Mrs. Shilling angry.

Bernstein finally tells Betsy that he would like to help Lisa but he is unwilling to face her family. He also says that even though he would like to help, Lisa cannot rely upon his assistance.

M.N. tells Betsy that no progress was made with Mrs. Shilling either. Mrs. Shilling chastised M.N. for interfering with her family. M.N. says that Mrs. Shilling is defensive and dismissive. Mrs. Shilling even calls M.N. a "child" (p. 44).

Betsy and M.N. convince Lisa to meet with them after school.

In chapter eight, Lisa shows up at Mary Nell's house. At first, Lisa is not very receptive.

Betsy and M.N. express their feelings of concern and care. They tell Lisa that they just want to help her get through whatever is going on inside her. Betsy and M.N. ask Lisa if she would be comfortable talking to them about her emotions. Lisa seems open to the idea. Betsy and M.N. tell Lisa about their conversations with Mrs. Shilling and Mr. Bernstein. Lisa is not surprised to learn that her mother was less than helpful.

Betsy and M.N. ask Lisa who she thinks might be able to help her. Lisa tells the girls that Elizabeth Frazer could help her. Just then, Lisa walks out into the night, leaving M.N. and Betsy utterly bewildered.



Betsy narrates chapter nine as well. After Lisa leaves, M.N. and Betsy try to come up with a plan of action to help Lisa. The girls agree that they need to do some research based on Lisa's most obvious symptoms. They begin reading from the encyclopedia. Betsy and M.N. believe that Lisa by be schizophrenic or manic-depressive (known today as bipolar disorder). Betsy and M.N. both feel that Lisa is probably bi-polar, because of the shifts in her mood and behavior from bright to dark.

Betsy admits that she feels as though she and M.N. are in over their heads. Also, Betsy does not recall Lisa agreeing to participate in their impromptu treatment plan.

M.N. also suggests that Betsy talk to Mr. Bernstein again - just for informational purposes.

M.N. and Betsy agree to keep working to find a solution for Lisa. They also decide to include Elizabeth Frazer in the process since Lisa said she wanted Elizabeth to be involved.

In chapter ten, Betsy has another conversation with Mr. Bernstein the following day. Bernstein is still very apprehensive about helping Lisa's friends. Bernstein does agree to meet with Betsy occasionally. He offers to lend her all the books she needs.

M.N. and Betsy meet with Elizabeth Frazer in the school cafeteria at lunch. Elizabeth seems unsympathetic to Betsy and M.N.'s requests for assistance with Lisa. Elizabeth does to agree to help right away. She repeatedly asks M.N. and Betsy exactly how they plan to help Lisa. Neither girl gives Elizabeth a definite answer other than talk therapy.

Elizabeth explains to Betsy and M.N. that caring about someone is not a qualification for being able to help someone with mental health issues. Finally, Elizabeth says she will help M.N. and Betsy with Lisa's therapy. Elizabeth cautions the other two girls not to expect too much. Betsy and M.N. are just relieved not to be in this alone.

Chapters 6 - 10 (Pages 33 - 60) Analysis

Lisa's return home poses some challenges for all four of the girls. While Lisa makes her slide into instability, M.N. and Betsy decide that there must be something they can do. It is at this point that Betsy fully invests herself in a friendship (of sorts) with Lisa. Betsy does not like feeling powerless and her sense of justice is being thrown into question. It is impossible for the character to behave any other way and it is Betsy who sets things in motion.

When M.N. and Betsy have their conversations with the Shillings and Mr. Bernstein, the girls enter into the situation with open minds, feeling assured that Mr. and Mrs. Shilling and the guidance counselor will agree with them about Lisa's condition. Betsy and M.N. receive rude awakenings because the adults in Lisa's life refuse to step in and change things significantly. The adults are the people who stand back passively, in denial and in fear of calling the wrong people to task for letting Lisa continue to self-destruct. Mr. Bernstein does not try to hide the fact that the students are not really a priority for him.



He is an administrator who does as little as possible because he is insecure about his ability to connect with the students.

M.N.'s experience with Mrs. Shilling is less productive than Betsy's conversation with Mr. Bernstein. Mrs. Shilling is in denial about Lisa and her dismissive attitude proves this. Mrs. Shilling's treatment of M.N. foreshadows the character's eventual downfall later in the narrative.

In chapter eight, Lisa reveals that she believes Elizabeth Frazer could help her get better. Lisa senses something in Elizabeth but she does not tell this to M.N. and Betsy. Instinctively, Lisa knows that she and Elizabeth have something important in common but Lisa is unable to identify what that something might be. This is interesting, since Elizabeth behaves more distant toward Lisa than the other two girls.

In chapter nine, the plan to save Lisa Shilling picks up momentum when Betsy and M.N. decide that Lisa is manic-depressive (bi-polar). Even with this amateur diagnosis, though, both girls are beginning to realize that Lisa is much more in distress than they knew. At this point, it also occurs to Betsy Goodman that Lisa never specifically agreed to be a part of the therapy plan. Lisa is not making any significant improvement as yet. Elizabeth's questioning Betsy about a specific plan of action shows how unprepared and uninformed Betsy and M.N. still are.



Chapters 11 - 15 (Pages 60 - 96)

Chapters 11 - 15 (Pages 60 - 96) Summary

In chapter eleven, Betsy tells the reader that she loves movies and classic movie stars like Cliff Robertson.

Betsy, M.N. and Elizabeth all wait for Lisa after school one day. Lisa has agreed to meet them at the end of the day. When Lisa does not show up, M.N. becomes irritated. Elizabeth is unfazed and she goes home. Betsy notices feeling a certain amount of anxiety and they all part ways.

Betsy continues to do more research. She learns about Pavlov's experiments with salivating dogs. Betsy also reads about something called the "approach-avoidance" conflict.

After reading one of her sister's old psychology text books, Betsy feels as though she has come to a dead end. She decides to watch Elizabeth Taylor and Montgomery Cliff in Raintree County. Betsy thinks she might be able to learn something on Lisa's condition from the movie. IN the film, Taylor's character is a young emotionally disturbed woman.

During the film, Lisa Shilling suddenly comes to Betsy's house. This surprises Betsy since she and Lisa are not really that close. Betsy is (at this point, anyway) more M.N. friend's than Lisa. Lisa makes Betsy a little nervous. Betsy admits this to Lisa and Lisa tells Betsy that she appreciates' Betsy's honesty. Betsy tells Lisa that she cannot help but tell the truth.

Lisa tells Betsy that she does not always trust M.N. to be honest with her.

Lisa also tells Betsy that she cannot locate Elizabeth. Betsy goes to the kitchen to telephone Elizabeth. When Betsy returns, Lisa is gone.

In chapter twelve, Betsy goes back to watching the movie. Just then, Elizabeth Frazer arrives. A few moments later, M.N. joins Betsy and Elizabeth.

Betsy tells the two other girls what happened with Lisa. Both M.N. and Elizabeth wonder aloud why Lisa would come to Betsy before seeking out either of them. Betsy takes no offense at their surprise; she too wonders what would prompt Lisa to go to her first. The girls are still somewhat puzzled as to how to go about helping Lisa.

Betsy finds Lisa sitting on the floor of a drink closet. Things begin normally enough, but Lisa soon begins acting strangely.

Lisa tells Betsy and M.N. and Elizabeth that she sees and hears things that other people do not see or hear. Lisa becomes increasingly agitated and she makes M.N. cry



by saying hurtful things to M.N. Eventually, Lisa calms down and manages to apologize to M.N. and ask the girls for help. Soon afterward, Lisa leaves again.

In chapter thirteen, M.N. begins diagnosing everyone after the previous unsuccessful meeting with Lisa. The girls continue to meet with Lisa, but without any significant progress. M.N. is slightly threatened because she is not in complete control of things concerning Lisa. M goes to her father for advice.

Reverend Fickett believes that he could help Lisa if he, too, were involved in her care. Reverend Fickett also tells M.N. that what she, Betsy, and Elizabeth are doing will only make matters with Lisa worse.

M.N.'s father takes it upon himself to work on Lisa's behalf. To that end, Reverend Fickett talks with Mr. Milne, the girls' English teacher. Milne and Rev. Fickett then pay a visit to Mr. Shilling, Lisa's father.

Reverend Fickett and Mr. Milne realize that they have very little firsthand experience with Lisa to draw on. Much of what they know is based on hearsay. Mr. Shilling remains unconvinced of the severity of Lisa's illness. Shilling insists that Lisa is behaving like a normal person. Fickett and Milne have a difficult time convincing Mr. Shilling that Lisa is emotionally unwell.

As their conversation ends, Lisa tears into the room and yells at her father to do something, anything, to help her. Lisa quickly runs out of the room after her brief outburst.

In chapter fourteen, Elizabeth, Betsy, M.N. and Lisa all have another session scheduled. Before Lisa arrives at M.N.'s house, she, Betsy, and Elizabeth commiserate about Mr. Milne and Reverend Fickett's disappointing talk with Mr. Shilling.

M.N. decides to encourage Lisa to free-associate. M.N. tells Lisa to say whatever comes into her head with stopping herself. This does not go well. Just then, Lisa tells M.N. about a dream.

M.N.'s interest is piqued. After Lisa moves to the couch, she begins telling the dream. M.N. is very excited about Lisa telling her dream. M.N. thinks it is important to examine Lisa's dreams because there might be something vital going on in Lisa's subconscious. M.N. thinks that interpreting dreams is one way to map the activity of the subconscious mind.

In chapter fifteen, Mr. Bernstein tells Betsy that he has spoken to all of Lisa's teachers about her situation. The teachers all agree that something serious is going on with Lisa but they feel powerless to help. The teachers are afraid of getting into trouble with Mr. and Mrs. Shilling. Teachers are reluctant to deal with parents who cause trouble.

Bernstein tells Betsy that Lisa's teachers agree that either Elizabeth or M.N. must be with Lisa at all times. Lisa will not be called on in class, which should lessen her anxiety.



Betsy notices that Lisa sometimes behaves as though she has two personalities - her ordinary self and a self with an English accent and a nasty, mean sense of humor.

One day at lunch, Elizabeth tells Betsy that they might have one more option where helping Lisa is concerned. Elizabeth rushes off, leaving Betsy to wonder what Elizabeth's bright idea might be. All of a sudden, Betsy and Lisa's ex-boyfriend Brian Morris are exchanging smiles across the room.

Chapters 11 - 15 (Pages 60 - 96) Analysis

When Lisa admits to hearing voices, the fact of her mental illness takes hold in the minds of the other girls. Lisa does, however, admit that she wants help.

Reverend Fickett is introduced into the narrative. Like the other adults in the narrative (with the possible exception of Mr. Milne and Mr. Goodman), Mary Nell's father is well-meaning but totally inexperienced in matters concerning young people like Lisa Goodman. Fickett assumes that since he is older, he would be better able to assist Lisa than M.N. and the others. Fickett is somewhat naïve, but his innocence is met with resistance when he confronts Mr. Shilling. Lisa's outburst in front of her father, Reverend Fickett, and Mr. Milne should prove to Mr. Shilling that his daughter is in trouble. Shilling's obstinacy is indicative of his selfishness and his level of denial. It is also worth mentioning that Shilling may feel partially responsible for some of Lisa's anxiety.

Betsy's interest in movies and movie stars is an indication that in the midst of the confusion caused by Lisa, she is still just a girl at heart. The situation with Lisa Shilling comes unexpectedly. Betsy, M.N., and Elizabeth are still very much children. Also, Betsy's belief that she may be able to learn something valuable from an Elizabeth Taylor movie is another signal that she can be immature at times. Lisa's disappearing acts continue. Her habit of showing up without notice has become part of what those around her simply have to work around. Lisa is still noncommittal about letting her friends help her but the fact that she is looking for Elizabeth is important to Betsy.

M.N. takes herself a little too seriously in chapter fourteen. M.N.'s suggestion to Lisa that she free-associate is part of classic psychotherapeutic approach, similar to asking a patient to lie on a couch during the session. Lisa plays a joke on M.N. that breaks the heavy tone of the girls' friendship. This episode proves that Lisa and her three friends are still friends, regardless of what is going on in their lives. Lisa may be struggling, but she manages to preserve her sense of humor. Laughter with her friends shows that Lisa is able to live happily and normally.

Chapter fifteen gives another example of adults feeling powerless to help Lisa. In this chapter, Lisa's teachers have an opportunity to help Lisa, but the measures they take are rather passive. Once again, the fear of Mr. and Mrs. Shilling's reaction is what fuels the teachers' hands-off approach to the situation. Betsy's observation that sometimes Lisa shows signs of a second personality is a foreshadowing of Lisa's final breakdown and suicide attempt. Splitting off from her true self is a sign that things are happening



which Lisa does not feel able to cope with. Her "other" self takes over when things become too painful. There is some indication that Lisa is conscious of herself when she splits off.

Elizabeth and M.N. become Lisa's official babysitters. The teachers are unable (or unwilling) to do more for Lisa and their only solution is to make sure Lisa is never alone in school. And although Lisa is accompanied at all times, having M.N. and Elizabeth with her does not deter Lisa from acting out.

Elizabeth's announcement that there is at least one additional option for Lisa is a foreshadowing of the arrival in the narrative of Dr. Neil Donovan. Also, the brief episode that takes place between Betsy and Brian Morris in the cafeteria foreshadows what eventually occurs between them in the final chapter of the narrative. Finally, Becky's flirtation with Brian Morris is further proof that she is still a teenage girl.

The impotence of the adults at school plays into an underlying sentiment in the novel. Becky, M.N., and Elizabeth are only teenagers, but together they manage to steer their friend in the direction of sanity and freedom. They have no particular power, they only have their desire to bring Lisa Shilling out of her own darkness. The adults are afraid of one another and they allow this fear to stand in the way of doing what they all know is right for Lisa.



Chapters 16 - 20 (Pages 97 - 130)

Chapters 16 - 20 (Pages 97 - 130) Summary

A few weeks later, Elizabeth invites Betsy, Lisa and M.N. to her house for a cookout in chapter sixteen. Things go smoothly at first. The girls have a good time laughing and talking about any number of things. They discuss music and movies and movie stars. The four of them also talk about current events in the U.S. Sometime during the conversation, Lisa's tone changes without anyone noticing.

All of a sudden, Lisa attacks Elizabeth while Elizabeth puts out the cooking fire. Lisa seems almost supernaturally strong. Betsy and M.N. attempt to stop Lisa's virulent attack, but they are unsuccessful at first. When M.N. tries to subdue Lisa, Lisa slaps, kicks and punches M.N. Betsy eventually manages to stop Lisa from hurting Elizabeth any more. After the attack, Lisa falls into something of a trance. M.N. reproaches Lisa for behaving so violently. Elizabeth tells M.N. to just let the matter drop.

Betsy believes that Elizabeth has been through something like this before. Elizabeth did not fight back when Lisa attacked her. Betsy wonders how Lisa could know that her behavior would not shock Elizabeth at all. Betsy goes home and tries to forget about what happened that night.

The day after the attack, Elizabeth shows up at school in chapter seventeen, looking as though nothing had ever happened. She still has a split lip, a black eye and, as far as Betsy could remember, a couple of broken ribs.

Thereafter, M.N. and Betsy are constantly at Lisa's side. Elizabeth withdraws in order to think things through. Lisa asks Betsy to call the police if she ever goes berserk again. Betsy promises, although she does not want to.

Betsy tells Mr. Bernstein about Lisa's request and Bernstein thinks it is a good idea to call the police. Mr. Bernstein thinks that if Lisa is arrested, her parents will finally have to take notice and get their daughter some kind of help. Betsy is not sure she likes the idea of Lisa being arrested.

Betsy realizes that Lisa's "English side" does not act out when Lisa is with her parents at home. One day, Tracy (Lisa's twelve-year-old sister) calls to talk to M.N. Tracy asks M.N. if M.N. notices anything strange about Lisa's behavior. M.N. says no, but Tracy still knows that there is something going on with Lisa.

M.N. tells Betsy that she is considering inviting Tracy to one of the therapy sessions. Perhaps if Tracy witnesses Lisa's odd behavior, Tracy could talk her parents into getting help for Lisa.



Betsy continues to observe Lisa. Betsy cannot imagine why Lisa would want to attack Elizabeth. Lisa sleeps in class and manages to say almost nothing. Betsy memorizes important emergency phone numbers in case she ever needs them.

In chapter eighteen, Betsy invites the girls to her house for dinner. Elizabeth, M.N. and Lisa all show up. This evening, Lisa is almost non-responsive. She barely looks at the others and gives one-word answers. The girls have all seen Lisa this way before.

Unexpectedly, Betsy's father and mother come home early. Lisa smiles and greets Mr. Goodwin politely but she never tops smiling. Before Mr. Goodman leaves the room, Lisa walks right through a glass door. She cuts herself badly and Mr. Goodman, Betsy, Elizabeth and M.N. are all astounded at what Lisa has done. Betsy calls for an ambulance. Then she calls Mrs. Shilling.

Mrs. Shilling arrives shortly before the ambulance. The others, including Mr. Goodman, try to tell Mrs. Shilling how sick Lisa is. Mrs. Shilling continues to blame M.N. for Lisa's problems. She accuses M.N. of having too vivid an imagination. Mrs. Shilling refuses to listen to what Betsy and the others have to say. Lisa's mother forbids the girls to see Lisa ever again.

In chapter nineteen, Lisa is in the hospital after walking through the glass door. Betsy, M.N., and Elizabeth return to their lives. There are exams to take and homework to do. Still, the girls feel as though something is missing. Betsy begins to feel as though their efforts to help Lisa have all come to nothing.

M.N. returns to her old optimistic self. She takes heart from the fact that Lisa is in the hospital where medical professionals will have to evaluate her before sending her home.

Elizabeth fails to show up at school two days in a row. Betsy wonders about Elizabeth's absence. Betsy still thinks that if there is anyone who can help Lisa it is Elizabeth Frazer.

Betsy and M.N. run into Brian Morris in the cafeteria. Brian and Betsy establish nervous eye contact. M.N. ruins the moment, however, after Brian tells the girls that Lisa went home from the hospital that morning. Brian tells M.N. and Betsy that he did not visit Lisa in the hospital. He says he just could not bring himself to see her.

Elizabeth invites M.N. and Betsy to her house for dinner.

When Betsy arrives at Elizabeth Frazer's house in chapter twenty, she meets Neil Donovan for the first time.

Dr. Donovan is a psychiatrist and an analyst. Betsy is immediately smitten with Dr. Donovan. He is handsome and charming. For a short time, Betsy is willing to relinquish her undying love for Paul Newman.



Donovan is a friend of the Frazer family who has come to talk to M.N. and Betsy about their friendship with Lisa.

While Dr. Donovan speaks privately with Mary Nell, Betsy and Elizabeth wait in another room and talk. Elizabeth admits to Betsy that she, too, was sent away for a time because of emotional distress. Dr. Donovan was Elizabeth Frazer's doctor.

Elizabeth makes Betsy promise not to say anything to Lisa about what Elizabeth went through. Betsy and Elizabeth both understand that if Lisa finds out about Elizabeth's past, she would no longer trust Elizabeth.

Elizabeth tells Betsy that her father is paying the bill for Dr. Donovan's services. Mr. Frazer knows that the Shillings would not be willing to pay for Lisa's care - not yet, anyway. Betsy realizes how much Elizabeth's friendship means to her.

Betsy has a one-on-one conversation with Dr. Donovan. She tells Donovan that she fears Lisa might try to commit suicide someday. Betsy is angry with Lisa's parents because they are so deep in denial about Lisa's true mental state. Dr. Donovan tells Betsy that getting Lisa the help she needs might not be an easy task. Betsy determines that she is not in love with Dr. Donovan after all. She re-affirms her love of Paul Newman.

Chapters 16 - 20 (Pages 97 - 130) Analysis

Chapter sixteen signals the downward trajectory of the narrative arc. That is to say, this chapter sets the stage for what happens at the close of the narrative. Lisa's attack on Elizabeth is the high tension point of the novel. It means that Lisa is still losing control of her emotions and actions. Lisa strikes out at the one person she has expressed an interest in - Elizabeth Frazer. Perhaps Lisa attacks Elizabeth out of frustration or anger at her situation.

Another reason for the attack could be that Lisa's physical violence against herself is no longer working. Lisa is not, at this place in the narrative, taking her frustration and anxiety out on herself. Elizabeth's non-reaction suggests that Elizabeth does not view Lisa's behavior as out of the ordinary. Elizabeth remains calm, which keeps Lisa from escalating or becoming more upset.

The attack is never mentioned again in the narrative. Lisa's instructions to Betsy to contact the police put Betsy in an uncomfortable position. Betsy knows that if the police come for Lisa, things would only continue to deteriorate. Bernstein's attitude is in keeping with his passivity. If the police were allowed to intervene, Mr. Bernstein knows that it would get Mr. and Mrs. Shilling's attention. There is nothing to indicate that they would find help for their daughter.

M.N. lies to Tracy when she tells Tracy that she does not notice anything unusual about Lisa's actions. Tracy's concern is twofold. First of all, Tracy talks to M.N. because there is no one else for Tracy to discuss her sister with. Tracy already knows that her parents



are not fully aware of what is really going on. Secondly, Tracy may be feeling some concern that her sister's problem may one day be her own. It would be normal for Tracy to feel concerned that she may also end up hearing voices one day. Until Lisa begins to act out, Tracy has someone to look up to - someone who care about what happens to Tracy.

Chapter eighteen is also a turning point in the narrative. When Mr. Goodman witnesses Lisa walking through the glass door, he becomes the first adult in the novel to actually see what Betsy and the other girls have seen all along. Mr. Goodman's shock and outrage are not enough to have an impact on Mrs. Shilling. Like her husband, Mrs. Shilling blames everyone else for Lisa's state of mind. Mr. Goodman's appeals fall on deaf ears and Mrs. Shilling exercises her imagined power by forbidding Betsy and M.N. and Elizabeth to see Lisa anymore. Mrs. Shilling is basically saying that Betsy and her father are both liars. Mrs. Shilling's selfishness is rivaled only by her husband's selfishness. Mrs. Shilling's refusal to accept her daughter's present state of mind is something that comes back to haunt her after Lisa is hospitalized for an inadvertent suicide attempt.

Although some time passes since they last saw Lisa Shilling, Betsy, Elizabeth and M.N. are still very much in process with Lisa and one another. That is to say, even though they have not seen Lisa, the other girls still think of her and they remain invested in Lisa's eventual recovery. Lisa's hospitalization is a blessing in disguise. She is in a place where people can monitor her closely and she is away from her parents, which probably lessens her tension and anxiety. Also, when Lisa finally meets Dr. Donovan, she is a captive audience and less likely to act out in a dangerous way.

Knowing about Elizabeth's past problems brings her closer to Betsy. Betsy now knows that Elizabeth is a person like anyone else. Elizabeth's beauty and money were not enough to keep her from depression and darkness. Betsy also realizes that Elizabeth's strength comes from her personal experience. The way Elizabeth treats Lisa is the way someone who cared once treated Elizabeth Frazer.

Dr. Donovan enters the narrative fairly late in the story. However, his arrival on the scene is extremely timely. By the time Lisa actually tries to commit suicide, Donovan is already in place as an asset. Dr. Donovan is an expert at dealing with people like Elizabeth and Lisa. Nothing that Betsy or the other girls tell him causes the slightest of doubt or insecurity in Dr. Donovan.

Chapters sixteen through twenty provide the groundwork for resolution. Lisa's absence enables Mary Nell, Betsy and Elizabeth to continue on without the stress and drama of trying to cure a friend. After Lisa is hospitalized this time, the girls become more aware that Lisa will not improve unless her parents become more involved in her life. Mr. and Mrs. Shilling continue to be an obstacle to their daughter's mental health throughout the entire narrative. For Lisa, though, their attention and validation is the last step before she can fully recover.



Chapters 21 and 22 (Pages 131 - 143)

Chapters 21 and 22 (Pages 131 - 143) Summary

In chapter twenty-one, Betsy realizes that there is very little anyone can do for Lisa if Lisa does not want help. Because of Mrs. Shilling, Lisa is beyond the help of her three closest friends.

Dr. Donovan meets with Mr. Bernstein. Betsy wonders how productive their meeting will be. Later, Dr. Donovan has dinner with Betsy and the Goodman family. Mr. Goodman tells Dr. Donovan of his personal experiences with Lisa Shilling. The next morning, Betsy, Elizabeth, M.N. and Dr. Donovan learn that Lisa was hospitalized for taking an overdose of pills.

Mr. Goodman agrees to call Mr. Shilling and tell him about Dr. Donovan. This episode would surely open Mr. and Mrs. Shilling's eyes to Lisa's pain and suffering. Dr. Donovan tells the girls that Lisa is not in any danger. The three girls and Dr. Donovan go to the hospital later that afternoon to visit Lisa.

Mrs. Shilling no longer objects to Becky and the other girls visiting Lisa. Lisa is barely coherent when her friends arrive at her bedside. She is lifeless and not speaking. Elizabeth, Betsy, and Mary Nell introduce Lisa to Dr. Donovan. Lisa begins to cry.

The three friends leave the hospital, overjoyed that Lisa will finally receive the care she needs and deserves. M.N., Betsy and Elizabeth run from the hospital to a nearby park. They laugh and shout and run through the grass. They are elated that Lisa can now begin to heal on the inside.

In chapter twenty-two, the school year is almost finished. Lisa is transferred to a facility in upstate New York where Dr. Donovan can treat her for her emotional problems. Surprisingly, Mr. and Mrs. Shilling were the ones to suggest Lisa being sent there.

Mr. Shilling, though, refuses to leave her house. She is afraid that her neighbors will criticize her so she stays shut away twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week.

Dr. Donovan tells Betsy, Elizabeth, and M.N. that Lisa may be ready to visit them in December; seven months away. Donovan warns the girls that Lisa may get worse before she gets better. Donovan agrees to stay in touch with M.N. and the others and to let them know how Lisa is getting along.

M.N. is in a hurry to share her knowledge with others who may have a "Lisa" in their lives. With Lisa upstate and Elizabeth and M.N. in Maine and Ohio, respectively, Betsy discovers that she be home alone for the entire summer. Although this saddens her, Betsy's spirits are lifted when M.N. reminds her that Brian Morris is still around and that he is single.



Chapters 21 and 22 (Pages 131 - 143) Analysis

The final two chapters of Lisa, Bright and Dark bring the narrative full circle. Lisa does attempt to commit suicide by taking too many pills. There is nothing her friends could have done to prevent Lisa's actions. And while M.N. and the other girls feel empathy for Lisa, they nonetheless realize that they are not qualified to help her. Dr. Donovan is a symbol of release for Becky, M.N. and Elizabeth because he represents the real possibility of Lisa getting healthy again. When Lisa does finally meet Dr. Donovan, she knows that Donovan can and will help her. It took a suicide attempt for Lisa to get the attention of someone who could actually make a difference in her life.

Betsy, M.N. and Elizabeth return to being teenage girls again when they leave the hospital and go to the park. A childlike sense of freedom returns to the girls when they receive concrete proof that Lisa is no longer alone in her mind. Dr. Donovan joins the group of adults in the narrative who are proactive and willing to help Lisa and the others.

Chapter twenty-two signals the end of the novel and the end of the girls' school year. Each of them goes in a different direction for the summer vacation. This also happens in life. Lisa's mental health recovery is closely connected to the lives of Betsy, M.N., and Elizabeth. Lisa's journey begins in the hospital upstate with Dr. Donovan guiding her and caring for her. M.N. and Elizabeth are getting away from their home on Long Island to recover from the weight of Lisa and her falling apart.

Lisa's mother, Mrs. Shilling, is the only character who takes a step backward. Mrs. Shilling's unwillingness to leave her home is an indication that the character feels a great deal of shame. It is also interesting that Mrs. Shilling is still just as concerned with other people's opinions at the end of the narrative as she was at the beginning. Her selfishness, self-centeredness do not decrease, even after her daughter is hospitalized. In addition, this information proves that perhaps Mrs. Shilling's mental state is proof that the character was off-balance all along.



Characters

Lisa Shilling

Lisa Shilling is one of the main protagonists in the narrative. Lisa is the daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Shilling and the older sister of Tracy Shilling. Lisa has emotional problems that lead her friends to believe that she is manic-depressive (bi-polar). Lisa engages in self-mutilation, and is sometimes violent. At one point, Lisa exhibits signs of multiple personality disorder (MPD). Her other "personality" speaks with an English accent and makes cruel remarks to those around her. In this state, Lisa loved to "show off [...] to demonstrate how clever she was, how mean and brilliant and in charge" (p. 92). Lisa's behavior frightens and confuses her friends. She spirals downward, knowing all the while that she is losing her sanity.

Lisa pleads with her parents to get help for her, but her parents do not listen. As a result, Lisa has difficulty trusting people. In the beginning, she is reticent to let Betsy and the others help her recover. Without intending to, Lisa Shilling influences everyone around her in one way or another. Betsy, Elizabeth and Mary Nell all become absorbed in helping Lisa. In the process, each girl learns something about herself and her emotional life.

Lisa is sixteen years old. Before she begins having emotional problems, Lisa is thought of as pretty and popular; a born leader. For a time, Lisa dates Brian Morris and the two of them are viewed as an ideal couple. Lisa and Brian are visible and at the top of their school's social hierarchy. Everyone assumes that Lisa will succeed. Eventually, Brian ends their relationship because of Lisa's unpredictability and the confusion it causes Brian.

A specific diagnosis for Lisa's difficulty is not identified in the narrative. Hearing voices suggests psychosis, while the multiple personality behavior is a schizophrenic in nature. The self-mutilation that Lisa engages in means that she struggles to externalize her pain. All of these symptoms are related to major mental illnesses and as such could be the root of Lisa's distress. Regardless of any textbook label, Lisa triumphs over her circumstance because she is able to get help.

Betsy Goodman

When the novel begins, Betsy Goodman and Lisa Shilling are not especially close. Betsy gets to know Lisa through Mary Nell Fickett. M.N. and Lisa are good friends. Interestingly, Betsy Goodman narrates the majority of the novel and it is her journey that provides the filter through which the story is presented to the reader. Betsy's thoughts and impressions are interwoven in the narrative and what happens with Lisa Shilling and the other girls proves to be a significant moment in Betsy's life.



Betsy is also fifteen years old. She is bright and well-adjusted. She enjoys school and she likes being with her friends. Betsy lives with her parents and brother Ben. Betsy describes herself as average looking, 5'4" tall with dark, straight shoulder-length hair. Betsy has large brown eyes and she is near-sighted. Sometimes she wears glasses. Betsy's main ambition is to get married and have a family. Betsy thinks she would be a very good wife. Betsy sees herself as average but still rather interesting. Betsy has a close, warm relationship with her father but not with her mother. Betsy does not seem to mind this. Her father is kind and patient and Betsy values his presence and generosity.

Mary Nell (M.N.) Fickett

Mary Nell (M.N.) Fickett is a minister's daughter. She is also a friend of Betsy Goodman, Lisa Shilling and Elizabeth Frazer. M.N. used to live in California. She is extremely intelligent, according to Betsy. M.N. is also "fantastically popular with boys" (p. 13). Betsy says that M.N. looks like the actress Shirley MacLaine. M.N. and Betsy are best friends. M.N. gives Betsy advice about boys and clothes and Betsy loves every minute of it. M.N. is a liberal thinker and the two girls are interested and intrigued by the world they live in. M.N. is an excellent researcher and once she is involved in the study of a particular subject, M.N. learns as much as she can. When M.N. and the others agree to help Lisa Shilling, M.N. throws herself into understanding the human psyche and its dark depths. Betsy also asserts that M.N. likes to be in control of just about everything.

M.N. has her insecurities which often place her in opposition to Elizabeth. M.N. and Elizabeth both have strong personalities and it is M.N. who experiences the most growth in the narrative. She learns how to interact with her friends cooperatively and with some affection. M.N. becomes able to recognize the contributions that other people make.

Elizabeth Frazer

Elizabeth Frazer is friends with Betsy Goodman, Lisa Shilling, and Mary Nell Fickett. Of the four girls, Elizabeth is the most attractive. Elizabeth is tall, blond and beautiful. In addition, she comes from a very wealthy family. Only Betsy knows that Elizabeth Frazer once had emotional problems similar to Lisa Shilling. Elizabeth is recovered from whatever issues she had, which puts her in a special position when it comes to helping Lisa. Somehow, Lisa is able to discern that she and Elizabeth are alike in this way.

Of all of Lisa Shilling's friends, Elizabeth is the most mature. She is "self-contained" in a way that Betsy and Mary Nell are not. Because of her friendship with Lisa, Elizabeth becomes closer friends with Betsy and M.N. She learns to rely on her experience with emotional disturbance as a valuable tool to help others.



Mr. Bernstein

Mr. Jeremy Bernstein is the guidance counselor at Betsy's high school. Betsy describes Mr. Bernstein as being shaped like the letter C. Bernstein is short, thin, and rather beige. He is afraid to stick his neck out to help Lisa Shilling because he is afraid of Mr. and Mrs. Shilling causing a scandal. Bernstein is not very adept at dealing with high school students and he is reluctant to move outside of his comfort zone. Consequently, Mr. Bernstein does not really help the students he works with and they do not take him seriously.

In spite of his role as a high school counselor, Bernstein is a timid man who does not deal well with other people. Initially, Mr. Bernstein is trapped inside his own shell and does not see any reason to venture outside his own personal and professional comfort zones. Ordinarily, Bernstein interacts with students on a superficial level only. He does not have the emotional capacity or the willingness to relate to the students on a deeper level. In the case of Lisa Shilling, Mr. Bernstein does take small steps in the right direction as he becomes progressively more involved in helping Betsy and the others.

Betsy describes Mr. Bernstein as short, and shaped like the letter "C" (p. 27). Bernstein is very thin, around fifty years of age and he wears thick glasses. Betsy also notes that Mr. Bernstein is "self-conscious" and "nervous about his job" (p. 27).

Mr. Shilling

Mr. Shilling is Lisa's father. Mr. Shilling is "flashy" (p. 28). Betsy observes that Mr. Shilling "tries too hard to be clever" (p. 28). He is a good-looking man, somewhere in his forties and he has questionable taste in clothing. Mr. Shilling is motivated by money. He travels the country on business and is away from home a great deal. Mr. Shilling is also somewhat hard-edged. He pays little or no attention to Lisa and Tracy.

Mrs. Shilling

Mrs. Shilling is Lisa Shilling's mother. Betsy thinks Mrs. Shilling talks funny. Mrs. Shilling and her husband are more concerned with money, property, and prestige than they are with their daughters' well-being. Mrs. Shilling can be rude and obstinate. She blames M.N. and Elizabeth Frazer for Lisa's behavioral problems.

She is as distasteful a character as her husband. Betsy describes Mrs. Shilling as gaudy and obnoxious. She does nothing to soften her husband's crude demeanor. Mrs. Shilling reminds Betsy of Shelley Winters, an actress known for playing promiscuous, eccentric characters. Mrs. Shilling wears ill-fitting clothes and a scarf on her head to hide the curlers in her hair and she is fond of fur coats. The character also defines herself according to possessions such as an enormous house. Mrs. Shilling also goes out of her way to appear wealthy and high-tone.



Mr. Goodman

Mr. Goodman is Betsy's father. Betsy adores her father and she looks to him for guidance and good sense. Mr. Goodman is an insurance salesman. He makes a good living and enjoys spending time with his family. Mr. Goodman is of medium height and average looks. Betsy says that her father "looks about medium in every respect" (p. 31). Mr. Goodman helps Betsy, M.N. and Elizabeth find help for Lisa after he watches Lisa walk through the glass door.

Mr. Goodman is attentive to Betsy and he is happy to be involved in his daughter's life. Also, his shock at seeing Lisa Shilling's self-destructive behavior genuinely shocks and concerns him. Betsy's feelings of admiration are validated by her father's willingness to step in on Lisa's behalf.

Dr. Neil Donovan

Dr. Donovan is Elizabeth Frazer's former psychiatrist. Dr. Donovan meets Betsy and M.N. at Elizabeth's house. Donovan agrees to talk to the girls about Lisa and offers to help in any way he can. Betsy notices immediately that Dr. Donovan is strikingly handsome. For a time, she is infatuated with the handsome doctor.

The character is approximately six feet tall (perhaps taller) and he has "long, wavy sandy" hair that curls at the back (p. 124). According to Betsy, Neil Donovan has the world's most beautiful nose. His blue eyes rival those of Betsy's idol Paul Newman.

Mr. Frazer

Mr. Frazer is Elizabeth's father. Frazer is Betsy's ideal gentleman. He is handsome, well-bred, well-dressed and extremely personable. Mr. Frazer is the kind of person who puts other people at ease. Betsy admires Mr. Frazer's ability to speak to just about anyone on a wide range of subjects. Frazer is also extremely wealthy and he loves his daughter Elizabeth very much. At Elizabeth's request, Mr. Frazer is helping to pay Lisa Shilling's medical bills.

Mr. Milne

Mr. Milne is the girls' English teacher. Mr. Milne is the only faculty member who is willing to get involved and try to help Lisa Shilling. Mr. Milne and Reverend Fickett have an unsatisfactory conversation with Mrs. Shilling about Lisa.



Tracy Shilling

Tracy Shilling is Lisa Shilling's twelve year-old sister. Tracy knows that Lisa is having problems, but she is confused and does not know who to talk to about her situation. Tracy and Lisa receive little attention from their parents.

Mrs. Goodman

Mrs. Goodman is Betsy's father and she is mentioned only once in the narrative. Betsy says her mother is a "joiner," meaning her mother is involved in lots of clubs and organizations like Planned Parenthood and the PTA. Betsy admits that her mother is often too busy to stop and talk to her. However when something is "really important," Betsy says she can count on her mother as well. No physical description of Mrs. Goodman is given.

Reverend Fickett

Reverend Fickett is Mary Nell Fickett's father. Reverend Fickett is a handsome man, Betsy says, but not especially strong. Fickett is something of an impractical man, although he is very "enthusiastic" most of the time. Being enthusiastic is something Reverend Fickett is good at (32).



Objects/Places

Ivory Soap

An American brand of bar soap. Ivory is manufactured by the Proctor & Gamble Company.

Strobe Light

Strobe lights were widely-used during the 1960s and 1970s in dance clubs and at parties. A strobe light gives the impression of moving in slow motion.

Iron Butterfly

The Iron Butterfly is a psychedelic rock band that became popular during the 1960s.

Vienna

Vienna is a city located in Austria. Vienna is often associated with Sigmund Freud.

Greenwich Village

Greenwich Village is a middle class neighborhood located in Manhattan, New York.

Encyclopedia Britannica

Encyclopedia Britannica is the oldest English-language encyclopedia. It is still in print today.

New England

New England is a name which refers to the northwestern region of the United States. New England is comprised of Maine, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, New Hampshire, Connecticut and Vermont.

Ohio

Ohio is a state located in the mid-western United States.

Free Association

Free association was developed by Sigmund Freud and his assistant Josef Breuer. Free association means that a patient says whatever comes to mind. This technique is supposed to help a patient learn more about his/her innermost thoughts and feelings.

Planned Parenthood

Planned Parenthood is an American organization dedicated to women's reproductive health.



Themes

Mental Illness

Lisa Shilling's behavior seems strange to her school friends at first but as things get worse, they begin to worry. Over time, Betsy, M.N. and even Elizabeth sense that Lisa's problems are deep and complex. When Betsy and M.N. start reading about psychological disturbances, they are led in many directions because they attempt to diagnose Lisa themselves. What the girls eventually come to understand is that mental illness should only be treated by professionals — this is what it took for Lisa Shilling. Lisa's friends are well-meaning but they are certainly amateurs. Lisa's symptoms and behavior deteriorate in the face of her friends' best intentions. In Lisa's case, the combined efforts of multiple characters proved to be the defining factor in her recovery. Without her friends, Lisa might have succeeded in taking her own life. Without the intervention of her teachers, school administrators, and friends' parents, Lisa would never have gained access to the psychiatric services so necessary to her mental and emotional balance.

Furthermore, mental illness is often ignored or minimized by those close to someone like Lisa Shilling. Recognizing the signs and symptoms of emotional or mental disturbance is not an easy thing to do. Lisa's parents were difficult to convince because they did not want to admit that Lisa was having problems. Somehow, Mr. and Mrs. Shilling were afraid to admit that they played a part in Lisa's breaking apart. Mr. and Mrs. Shilling's denial could have cost their daughter her life.

Finally, Betsy, M.N. and Elizabeth became more aware of their own individual mental health. After helping Lisa find the help she needed, each of her friends is able to make their peace with what happened and with their own imbalance. They are more educated now, and more capable of recognizing warning signs like Lisa's.

Friendship

Friendship is tested in this novel in an unusual way. Betsy, M.N., Elizabeth and Lisa are all close school friends. Each of them has a distinct personality and well-defined personal boundaries. When Lisa begins to act out, however, the other three girls are faced with difficult choices. Although Betsy and M.N. are quick to come to Lisa's assistance, it takes Elizabeth a while longer to accept the challenge of dealing with someone who is so ill. Betsy does not begin the novel as a close friend of Lisa Shilling, but she becomes one during the course of the story. Becky's friendship with M.N. is also a motivating factor in Betsy's agreement to help. Betsy is unselfish in her commitment to M.N. and Lisa's mental balance.

M.N. loves a challenge but her analytical attitude toward helping Lisa soon falls away and she too comes to genuinely care for Lisa and those around her. M.N. is an



intellectual and she enjoys reading and researching deep questions and mysteries. But working with Lisa's mental illness gives M.N. a new perspective. Lisa is a person with a mental illness, but she is not her illness. M.N. learns to separate the person from the disease where Lisa is concerned. Reading about something in a textbook is not the same as witnessing something firsthand. M.N.'s friendship with Lisa is hard-won. That is to say, in the beginning, M.N. seemed to take her connection with Lisa rather lightly. Watching Lisa fall apart and being able to do little to stop that process is humbling for M.N. but overall the character learns a significant lesson about friendship.

Perhaps Lisa has the most intense experience of friendship in the narrative. The character realizes that she is slipping into mental illness and continues to ask those around her for help — specifically, her parents. Lisa never asks her friends to help her, but she does not ask them to stay out of her life. Lisa's awareness of the seriousness of her situation keeps her in contact with her friends even though she may not trust them entirely. Lisa's friends are there in support of her every step of the way. She does not have to worry about being abandoned by Betsy, Elizabeth or M.N.

Shared Experience

When people share traumatic or very serious experiences, they tend to become closer. This is true in the case of M.N., Elizabeth and Betsy. All three of the girls begin the story relatively secure and comfortably situated in safe, happy friendships. What the girls go through with Lisa Shilling, however, challenges what they know about life and about normalcy. Elizabeth has already been through what Lisa is experiencing right now. Lisa relates to Elizabeth in a way that she does not relate to M.N. or Betsy. Lisa can sense something of her troubled self in Elizabeth. Unlike Betsy and M.N., though, Elizabeth knows what Lisa will have to go through to recover from her mental distress.

M.N. and Betsy have the experience of being outside the connection between Elizabeth and Lisa. However, the two girls share the memory of the dangerous, hurtful and insane things Lisa did and how those behaviors affected them as friends. Although the girls are still young, they are forced to grow up while they watch Lisa and her path to self-destruction and madness. Betsy and M.N. have the responsibility of being the first ones to leap into action to help Lisa. This responsibility is very serious because Lisa's progression becomes more volatile each time. When Elizabeth and M.N. have conflict, the fact of shared experience becomes significant in that the two girls are able to come to an understanding and a deeper friendship. Knowing and being known by their friends becomes increasingly important to Elizabeth, M.N. and Betsy after Lisa is finally hospitalized. the episode in which they run and laugh through the park shows that the girls are a solid, cohesive unit that can support them and Lisa.

Style

Point of View

Lisa, Bright and Dark features more than one narrator. First of all, the person narrating the beginning of chapter is never identified in the narrative. The author's choice to include such a passage is an interesting one. By using an unknown narrator, the author takes the emphasis off the characters for a moment in order to show a more complete picture. It can be assumed that Betsy Goodman is the person narrating this episode. It could also be that Elizabeth Frazer is the narrator, but there is nothing present in the narrative to support this assertion.

The remaining twenty-one chapters are all narrated by Betsy Goodman.

Betsy's point of view is very interesting for several reasons. First of all, Betty admits that she does not know Lisa Shilling very well when the story begins. M.N. knows Lisa better than Betsy but Betsy tells the story. In a way, Betsy and the reader become acquainted with Lisa at the same time. Also, Betsy's point of view allows the reader to see the other characters through the eyes of one of their contemporaries. This technique brings the characters into better focus by giving them context. From Betsy's narration, the reader knows that the main protagonists are high school students, all approximately sixteen years of age. Betsy and her friends are growing up during the 1960s, as reflected in Betsy's narration.

Finally, Betsy's narration provides legitimacy because Betsy is one of Lisa's friends, not a parent or counselor or other adult. Betsy's perspective is equally as important as an account told by someone older and more distant from Lisa.

Setting

The entire narrative takes place in and around Long Island, New York. There are several points at which a character uses the term "upstate," in reference to upstate New York.

At one point, Becky mentions Rome and Greece in an allusion to Dr. Donovan's "aquiline" nose. The city of San Jose, California, is the subject of an observation by Becky. Also, the city of Vienna is mentioned more than once in reference to Sigmund Freud and psychotherapy. Europe is also referenced.

San Francisco, California and Greenwich Village, New York are mentioned as well. Greenwich Village was (and is) a famous section of Manhattan in New York City.



Language and Meaning

The novel is written in standard English. The specialized words and phrases used throughout the narrative are related to several different subjects. For example, Betsy Goodman uses the word "groovy" on more than one occasion. Groovy was a word which was widely used during the 1960s. It was the equivalent of the word "cool", which many people still use today.

Also, Betsy is a film buff and as such, the character mentions the names of many well-known films and celebrity acting stars of the day. Paul Newman, Joanne Woodward, Montgomery Clift, Cliff Robertson, Paula Prentiss, Steve McQueen, Geraldine Page, Joan Crawford and Shelley Winters are a few of the actors she mentions. Additionally, the girls discuss popular music acts such as Dionne Warwick, Mama Cass (of The Mamas and the Papas), Iron Butterfly, and Sly and the Family Stone. Teenagers growing up in the 1960s would easily recognize these names as some of the most famous stars on the scene.

Betsy and the other girls learn and use words from psychiatry, psychotherapy and psychology such as schizophrenic, manic-depressive, split personality (Multiple Personality Disorder), depression, paranoia, catatonic, psychoses, persecution, and hallucination. Betsy mentions Sigmund Freud, widely known as the father of modern psychiatry and Vienna, Austria, which is Freud's home city.

Structure

Lisa, Bright and Dark is 143 pages long. The novel is divided into twenty-two chapters. The chapters vary in length from five to approximately eight pages. None of the chapters have titles. Chapters that are shorter in length allow the novel to flow more smoothly. The narrative unfolds quickly and there is little extraneous information provided in the narration. That is to say, the majority of the novel concerns itself with the characters and what happens in their lives.

The narrative structure of Lisa, Bright and Dark is linear. That is to say, there is a discernible beginning, middle, and end to this narrative. The narrative arc occurs in chapter sixteen when Lisa attacks Elizabeth Frazer at the cookout. The novel progresses chronologically. This means that time passes normally in the narrative. The only exception to this statement is the opening section of chapter one. This section is printed in italics, which distinguishes it from the text which follows.

There is evidence in the text that this portion of the chapter is being told by someone who spoke to M.N. after the dinner party took place. The narrator of this section is never named. It stands to reason, though, that the narrator would be either Betsy Goodman or Elizabeth Frazer.

The novel is also dialog-heavy. This means that the plot is primarily revealed to the reader by way of character conversations, rather than descriptive passages or narrator editorializing.



Quotes

"[Lisa is] the kind of girl who is usually secretary of the student council, not because everyone who knows her likes her, but because it seems the office is hers by right."

Chap. 3, p. 17

"Even being told about Lisa by a third person gave you the feeling she was undependable sometimes, a little strange."

Chap. 3, p. 18

"Adults - real ones - insist on thinking 'soft.'"

Chap. 5, p. 26

"[Mr. Bernstein!] You've got to be kidding! He's about as forceful as Prissy in *Gone with the Wind*."

Chap. 6, p. 38

"Dionne Warwick was still trying to get to San Jose, and we were trying to find Vienna. There was a big difference."

Chap. 9, p. 55

"[Betsy] was grateful [Mr. Bernstein] had come that far out of his particular shadow, even if he wanted only to stick one toe in the spotlight."

Chap. 10, p. 57

"All [Betsy] could think was that maybe that was plain and simple what madness was: doing just the opposite of what you wanted to do, and having no control over any of it."

Chap. 17, p. 107

"We couldn't think of anything but alias and the sound of glass smashing, and the non-sound of streaking blood."

Chap. 19, p. 119

"[Betsy] had recently begun to suspect that every time you expect one thing from life, something usually happens. There was no point in being constantly disappointed."

Chap. 19, p. 123

"[M.N., Betsy and Elizabeth] realized that [they] had begun to assume that not only would Lisa be glad to see [them], but she would also have miraculously recovered her mind."

Chap. 21, p. 135



Topics for Discussion

What is wrong with Lisa Shilling?

Why won't Lisa Shilling's parents find her some help?

What does Betsy Goodman think of Mrs. Shilling?

What is Mr. Bernstein really afraid of? Why is he unwilling to get involved with Lisa Shilling's case?

What causes Lisa's attack on Elizabeth Frazer? Why does Elizabeth not retaliate?

How does Elizabeth Frazer know Dr. Neil Donovan? Why does Elizabeth keep this information from Lisa?

What does Lisa Shilling do to get her parents' attention?

Which character is the main protagonist in this novel?

Why does Mr. Bernstein think it would be a good idea for Betsy to call the police on Lisa?

What prompts Betsy Goodman's decision to "help" Lisa Shilling get better?