

The Love Affair of Nathaniel P Study Guide

The Love Affair of Nathaniel P by Adelle Waldman

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Plot Summary

At the height of his literary career, Nathaniel Piven, known as Nate in the novel, first confronts women from his past when on his way to his ex-girlfriend Elisa's dinner party. He accidentally runs into Juliette on the street, a young woman he went out with only a couple of times but whom he impregnated. Juliette accuses him of being an asshole, having disappeared on her after she had an abortion. This run-in set off Nate's internal monologue, which continues on through the entire novel; the narrator depicts Nate's thought process as he struggles to make amends with his complicated past with women and seeks balance between his writing career and his personal life.

At Elisa's dinner party, Nate reveals the theme of his latest essay on the outsourcing of economic exploitation. In other words, his concerns are with liberal guilt. The night's conversation focuses on the issues of concern for Nate's generation of 30-something's in Brooklyn, New York. Nate notices Hannah at this party, someone he recognizes from past social gatherings, who is also a freelance writer whom he eventually has a serious relationship with. It is also at this party that Elisa reveals she is not completely over Nate. She hits on him by the end of the night.

After an introduction to the primary characters of the novel, the narrative devotes a whole chapter on a biography of Nate's past — from his childhood onward. Nate is the son of Jewish immigrants. He went to Jewish day school and was not much to look at as a young man. He was strong at math with a 4.0 GPA, the type who was placed in advanced classes, good at soccer and baseball but not exactly an athlete. He was your basic nice guy. He went to Harvard after high school and met Kristen, with whom he had his first serious relationship. He met Jason at Harvard as well, who became a life-long friend. By the end of his twenties, he had managed to make a career as a freelance writer, and was even offered a position as a regular book reviewer for a major online magazine.

A few days after Elisa's dinner party, Nate gets an email from Hannah, who extends the dinner conversation on liberal guilt. At first, Nate hesitates to get involved, afraid to have yet another failed relationship. He also worries about what his friend Jason would think, how he would not date someone like Hannah, but feels guilty for even thinking this way. Although he vacillates during their date, he comes to realize that he likes the lively conversation and surprises himself by not doing what he normally does and make a mental list of his date's faults. He throws caution to the wind by the end of the night of their first date by making out with her and enjoying the moment.

Yearning to see Hannah again, and against some apprehension, Nate calls her the next day. They meet at a bistro restaurant where they talk about their upbringing. At Nate's suggestion, they go to her place afterward and he makes a pass at her; she resists, offering him to stay over, but without sex. Her response surprises Nate, but he says he is fine with it. He really wants to stay, and she says it would be just fine.



Sometime later, Nate meets up with his headstrong, opinionated, but close friend Aurit, who grills him over his second date with Hannah, reprimanding him for not calling her by now. Nate emphasizes that it had been four nights ago that they had talked and that it was nice. Aurit suggests that Hanna is someone that might actually be good for Nate. In walks Greer Cohen, a young literary success with a bigger book deal than Nate's, and whom his friends at Elisa's party criticized for being pretentious. Nate notices how attractive and sexy she looks. After some light banter, Greer leaves and Aurit continues her assessment of Nate's love life, berating him for a history of picking the wrong women who are pretty; he finds reasons to be interested, but then when things do not work out he acts like the woman is the problem or relationships in general rather than seeing that the problem is in the women he chooses.

Nate is elated that his book is about to be released soon, feeling extremely gracious. He realizes that what makes him mildly anticipatory about seeing Hannah again is because they could both be the best versions of themselves. He knows himself well enough that he can predict how his good-natured side will not last as everything tends to fade. He agrees to Hannah's terms not to have sex when he asks her out again. After that night when she made it clear she did not want to have sex just yet, it would be all the harder to tell her he is not looking for something serious. He muses on how no one could stop him if he really wanted to be in a relationship, but at this time in his life he feels fulfilled from work and friends and so does not feel the desire for a romantic relationship. He hopes to argue that women want so badly to be in a relationship because they hate being alone. After all this vacillating back and forth in his thoughts about Hannah and about women in general, Nate gives in to his "asshole" tendency and writes a new message to Hannah that he cannot get together that night after all because of being swamped with a book review. After he sends the message, relief washes over him.

It is not long before Nate changes his mind and asks Hannah out again. She lifts her ban on sex. He grows in his fondness for Hannah and clearly moves toward starting a relationship with her, even though he had been nearly resolved not to. They narrate each other's lives to each other for the following weeks and have, according to Nate, great sex. However, trouble starts when Nate thinks about Hannah and their relationship in light of the opinion of his friends, including the ones with the most influence over him, Aurit and Jason. While he pushes back against Aurit's opinion that romantic relationships are the most important kind for humans, he finds himself overly sensitive to Jason's opinion that Hannah is mousy and not a perfect 10. He confronts Elisa at Jason's suggestion, telling her that he is seeing Hannah. Elisa is more angry at Hannah than at Nate, but the discomfort he feels with Elisa makes him appreciate Hannah all the more.

Just as the two of them have gotten comfortable with their relationship, Nate starts to withdraw from Hannah, seeing her as vulnerable and needy. They have their first argument wherein Hannah senses accurately that things are somehow different between the two of them. Her lashing out at him in anger unnerves Nate, leaving him shaky and on edge. After this, he starts picking on her looks, the flabby part of her arm, shallow thoughts that he feels ashamed of. After he checks out another woman most



obviously at a restaurant, things go downhill quickly. They try to salvage what is left, but they finally break up.

Nate runs into Greer Cohen yet again, who offers him her card with her number. After getting a hostile email from Hannah, Nate makes a move on Greer's flirtatious offer to get together to talk about writing. In the finale, he stays with Greer and moves in with her. He has not forgotten Hannah entirely though, as he remembers their good times together, and that he had even loved her. He cannot figure out why he ended up unhappy with Hannah, but resigns himself to the fleetingness of life and relationships.



Chapter 1

Summary

The first chapter of Adelle Waldman's novel establishes the character of its main protagonist, Nathaniel P., by means of his interactions with other people, from a former lover to his best friend. We first meet Nathaniel on a crowded street, where a woman whom he only went out with three or four times, Juliet, recognizes him. Before she does so, she looks pleased, only to grimace when she realizes whom he really is. He is the fellow who got her pregnant. After a brief exchange of pleasantries, the encounter turns ugly when Nathaniel says he is in a hurry to go to a dinner party. Juliet cuts him off saying, "You could have at least—" (2). Nathaniel wants to know what she means, but needs to get going, so he excuses himself. In return, she resorts to name-calling, accusing him of being an asshole. Nate obsesses over this encounter.

By page three, we realize for certain that Nathaniel accidentally impregnated Juliet, who had to then decide whether or not to abort the unborn child. He rationalizes away any possible fault on his part, that certainly on his account, he is not that bad of a guy. After all, most guys would have split in an instant. He got lucky when she decided, on her own, that the only real option was abortion. He paid for the abortion, even though she made more money than he did; he went with her to the actual abortion and then spent the whole day with her. He called a few days later to see how she was feeling. But when she answered that she was a little sore, but okay, he panicked that one thing would lead to another until they were regularly dating. He stopped contacting Juliet. He realizes he probably should have followed up but then decides on the reason she had called him an asshole on the street—he did not want to be her boyfriend let alone the father of her child.

Primarily through the perspective of the protagonist himself, third person-limited, the narrator cleverly exposes the basic traits of this young New York writer, who turns out to be simultaneously self-aware and self-deluding. Note the way the narrator describes Nathaniel from his perspective, as he rationalizes his actions: "Nathaniel Piven was a product of a postfeminist, 1980s childhood and politically correct, 1990s college education. He had learned all about male privilege. Moreover, he was in possession of a functional and frankly rather clamorous conscience" (3).

In the second half of Chapter 1, we are served a glimpse of Nathaniel's other main friendships over the course of an intimate dinner party that Elisa, Nathaniel's ex, hosts at her home: Elisa whom he had broken up with more than a year ago and with whom he remained friends; Jason, a fellow writer of nonfiction articles; Aurit, a good friend who recently returned from a research trip to Europe; Hannah, a girl he had met before, "here and there—a thin, pert-breasted writer, pleasant-looking in spite of rather angular features" who was "almost universally regarded as nice and smart, or smart and nice" (7). The narrative continues in the third-person limited perspective, describing each individual from Nate's point of view. For example, his view of his ex, Elisa, keeps shifting



during the evening: “Each time Nate saw her, Elisa’s beauty struck him anew, as if in the interval the memory of what she actually looked like had been distorted by the tortured emotions she elicited since they’d broken up” (9). As the evening conversations move along, Elisa’s whining voice brings back to Nate a “cocktail of guilt and pity and dread. Also, sheer annoyance—that spoiled, ill-tempered quality about her. Her prettiness became an irritant, a Calypso-like lure to entrap him, again” (9).

When Elisa asks what he is currently writing, Nate says he is working on an essay on “how one of the privileges of being elite is that we outsource the act of exploitation” (10). He recently wrote a book, received a significant advance, and though publication was many months away, it already created quite a bit of publicity. His current situation as writer is that he is getting closer to making it. The group of friends banter back and forth, keeping the conversation light, but Nate goes on to explain what he meant by his description of his essay, going on to say that “Conscience is the ultimate luxury” (11). Jason, described by the narrator as having “the aspect of a diabolical cherub” (11) chimes in to state the obvious, that Nate suffers from liberal guilt. Elisa decides aloud that she thinks Nate’s idea is interesting, and in response, Nate thinks that maybe their friendship is taking a turn for the better.

When Elisa looks at Nate suggestively, he panics and concludes that the situation is bad and compares their relationship to a battle or war. He is, it seems, gun shy, predicting how things will turn out as it had quite often, with Elisa in tears. Elisa touches his knee and he bolts toward her bookcase, meeting eyes with Hannah, his interest peaked.

Analysis

The novel carries off characterization successfully by means of interrelationships. For example, we come to perceive the main character of Nathaniel as simultaneously self-deceiving and self-aware through two scenes: the opening scene in the crowded street with Juliet, and the small dinner party at Elisa’s place. The integrity of Nathaniel’s character is immediately called into question with the first line: “It was too late to pretend he hadn’t seen her” (1), the ‘her’ being Juliet.

Part of Nate’s nature and a matter of character development is that he is good at rationalizing his behavior. We see this in his self-reflection, deciding that he possesses a functional and “clamorous conscience” (3), and when he imagines defending himself before an audience, which of course turns out to be the reader: “There he was, thirty years old, his career finally taking off—an outcome that had not seemed at all inevitable, or even particularly likely, in his twenties—when suddenly there erupted the question of whether he would become a father, which would obviously change everything. Yet it was not in his hands. It was in the hands of a person he barely knew, a woman whom, yes, he’d slept with, but who was by no means his girlfriend” (3). Nathan has a way of rationalizing away self-blame and assigning blame to the other person, as when he felt he was caught in one of those after-school specials, whose moral of not having sex with a girl unless you’re ready to raise a child with her was a load of bullshit, that what girl



with any self-respect would risk a brilliant future by deciding to have a baby. Then he moves on to subtly blaming Juliet who was not a teenager. At thirty-four years old, and a professional, she might have become pessimistic about dating and see this as her last bid for motherhood. So when to his relief she decided on abortion as the only viable option, he felt great relief, but he refused to show any emotion. He even said she should think hard about this decision; after all, “Who could blame him for any of it?” (4).

The author cleverly uses Nate's internal thoughts throughout the first part of Chapter 1 juxtaposed with his interaction with a minor character, to expose his contradictions that he himself is oblivious to: he rationalizes his behavior, justifies and excuses himself while at the same time showing moments of self-knowledge. Note for example, that “Nate had been surprised by just how awful he felt, how sad, how disgusted by the weak, wanton libidinousness as it seemed to him then that had brought him to this uncomfortable, dissembling place” (5).

The second half of the chapter only makes Nathan's contradictions more explicit. The theme of his essay reveals Nate's acute consciousness when it comes to economic exploitation of the disadvantaged. Referring to liberal exploitation as being similar to the treatment of the poor of Dickens's novel, he says: “We've gotten better at hiding it—from ourselves most of all. People back then at least justified their behavior by admitting to their contempt for the poor” (12). By this point, the reader has the sense of Nate's self-delusion, thanks to the first scene on the street. Now, we feel perplexed at the juxtaposition of this self-deception with self-awareness, that he is part of the category of the privileged; describing his essay in the works, he explains, including himself in the observation that elite outsource exploitation. We can see the irony of the situation and of the character himself.

Interestingly, the author pulls off strong characterization from a distance, through the third-person limited perspective, primarily that of Nathaniel P. Never does the reader see the author or narrator passing direct judgment on the protagonist, but rather, as we have seen above, the reader can surmise or interpret his traits by means of carefully crafted scenes that portray his interactions with others; however, ironically, while we see these scenes primarily from Nathan's close perspective, we are also given some distance, by the way the back-story is interspersed within the narrative present, explaining for example, how his friendships originated. Here we have a nice blend then, of the author utilizing the distance of third-person yet the closeness of one character's limited albeit warped, vision; thus, the use of both distant narration and one character's limited perspective creates irony to characterize a most peculiar protagonist.

Discussion Question 1

How does the narrative voice contribute to the development of Nate's character?



Discussion Question 2

What is the tone (the author's attitude towards her material)? Can you point to specific examples from Chapter 1?

Discussion Question 3

What is the tone (the author's attitude towards her material)? Can you point to specific examples from Chapter 1?

Vocabulary

adversary, adjacent, seedy, disdain, conspicuous, functional, affluent, idled, demeanor, dispassionate, companionable, clamorous, libidinousness, dissembling, dupe, limpid, histrionic, gentrifying, reproach, beatifically, acclimated, implored, elaborate, elite, implicit, etiquette, renovate, exploitation



Chapter 2

Summary

The first chapter of the novel insinuates that its main protagonist, Nathaniel P. (Nate) is something of an “asshole,” at least considered so by a secondary character, Juliette. Chapter two, however, directly claims that he is one, in the eyes of more than just one person. The entirety of Chapter 2 works as a biography of Nate’s past—from his childhood up to the point where Chapter 1 ends, his burgeoning interest in Hannah.

Nate is the son of Jewish immigrants with good jobs, working for defense contractors. He went to Jewish day school, and back then, though he was not much to look at, but was not repulsive in appearance. He was strong at math with a 4.0 GPA, the type who was placed in advanced classes, good at soccer and baseball but not exactly an athlete. He was your basic nice guy to girls; however, he developed an odd obsession with devoting “copious intellectual resources to such questions as the verisimilitude of various household items to female genitalia,” or what the narrator calls his “autoerotic afternoons” (18).

In high school, Nate had one admirer, Michelle Goldstein. She had a self-conscious nature, affecting a cultured attitude when in school; however, her real personality seemed to shine when with Nate. As for Nate, he “felt as if the two of them shared something, some nebulous, slightly melancholic sensitivity that made them different from their classmates” (21). Here we see Nate in an authentic, genuine moment; striking, considering his current disingenuousness.

While Nate liked Michelle's attention, he found her slightly repulsive. This is why, although they went to prom together, he did not carry on having sex with her. At that time, he also could not imagine sleeping with her and then blowing her off, as his friends Todd or Mike would have done. In other words, he was not an asshole like them. In high school, he appeared to be sympathetic and sensitive to the feelings of others, particularly girls.

Nate went to Harvard after high school, where he hoped to meet girls both smart and mature, besides beautiful. Through his suitemate Will McDormand, he acclimated to the Harvard type, which included chugging beer and mocking unattractive girls. Despite socializing with these party types, Nate had a sensitive conscience wherein he “believed passionately in the equality of man, disdained inherited privilege, and bemoaned on ideological grounds the failures of the French and Russian Revolutions;” (25). During his freshman year, he lusted after shallow girls, surprising to Nate since he expected Harvard girls to be smart or intellectual. Although they got into Harvard, they resisted conversation on abstract thought, culture, anything unrelated to drinking or the outdoors. Finally, halfway through his sophomore year, Nate grew tired of Will’s world. But he thought it was too late to make changes to his social life. Will had so powerfully influenced him, that when he tried to hang out with other people, he thought of Will’s



nature, such as casting shallow judgment on physical appearance. It was at this point in his life that Nate really began to read seriously. He read out of loneliness, but nonetheless this served as a turning point for him.

In his junior year, Nate met Kristen, who became his first serious relationship. He was drawn to her quiet confidence. In what Nate considered “the world’s crude judgment,” Kristen was a catch, “several notches above him in the college social hierarchy” (28). This was when he also met cheerful Jason (of the dinner party), in a literary theory class, who balanced the dynamic between Nate and Jason and another friend Peter who was sensitive and thoughtful. Alternating his time between Kristen, Jason, and Peter, Nate was the happiest he had ever been. Eventually though, Nate grew frustrated with Kristen’s lack of literary sensibility. The sheer practicality of her intelligence began to strain their relationship. When visiting Jason in New York, he noticed the difference in the women there with their sexy boots and glasses and cool hair. They even reading authors he admired such as Svevo or Bernhard on the subway. Slowly, he and Kristen grwe apart and “their squabbles began to feel more like sublimated judgments of the other’s entire person” (31). Unsurprisingly, they broke up amicably and Nate moved to New York. He assumed that the women he glimpsed in his past visit would fit his ideal woman, one who was sane, intellectual, and critical of the failings of the American system of education. But as the narrator poignantly points out: “He had been extremely naïve” (32).

On the New York scene, Nate struggled to even get a date, and when he did, he was in for a series of surprises. After going out with a girl named Justine, he gently suggested that they might not have a future; yet, she called him and suggested that he come over at 2:00 a.m. At a loss of any other way out, Nate lied and but said that he was not sure he was over his ex; Nate started on the path of being disingenuous. Though he felt bad for Justine because she had apparently “grown up in an infinitely bleaker suburbia than the one he had known; because her mother had repeatedly chosen ‘the asshole’ (her stepfather) over her;” and “because guys like Noah and Nate himself took advantage of her” (33). Yet, pity was not enough to turn into romantic feelings.

On the writing front, unhappy with the way one of his articles had been edited, Nate decided to quit writing for the left-wing magazine he had depended on for his main source of income besides credibility. Foreshadowing a bleak future, the narrator said that this “decision had disastrous consequences for his career and his finances” (34). However, Nate was still determined to make a living on writing; by the end of his twenties, he had managed to make a career as a freelance writer, and was even offered a position as a regular book reviewer for a major online magazine. At this time too, he stopped picking up girls at bars and on the subway, preferring to meet women with whom he could carry on a conversation at publishing parties. Chapter 2 ends with Nate’s summation of himself: “He had always been a rather well-disposed and agreeable sort of person, if he said so himself” (35). Everything leveled out when he met “Elisa the beautiful” and reaches his peak with “a six-figure advance from a major publishing house, further enhancing both his professional reputation and personal popularity” (35).



Analysis

In Chapter 2, the narrative changes its style in that it assesses Nate's character more directly than the first chapter. While Chapter 1 establishes Nate's current state of mind and behavior both from a distance and through Nate's perspective, Chapter 2 opens with a direct statement: "Nate had not always been the kind of guy women called an asshole. Only recently had he been popular enough to inspire such ill will" (17). Yet, the narrator carefully words this assessment, claiming not that he necessarily is for certain an asshole, but that women call him one.

The narrative then, is careful not to pass outright judgment on its protagonist. Rather, one can argue that this biography reads more like a case study of sorts of a middle-class male of the millennial generation, rather than as a condemnation of ass-like male behavior.

Chapter 2 works as a bio of Nate's life, and as such, depends wholly on flashback, from his childhood up until his current state of affairs. The narrator continues to primarily rely on Nate's view of matters to continue developing his character. For example, when the narrator describes how Nate had "pined for girls like Amy Perelman" in high school who dated guys like Scott, who "was tall and broad-shouldered and had that combination of crudeness and confidence that rendered intelligence not only irrelevant but slightly ridiculous, a peculiar if not entirely unamusing talent" (18), we surmise this and several other statements are Nate's sentiment; by this point, we have come to recognize the traits of his attitude. Considering how much we know about him up to this point, thanks to the perceptive style of writing, we know that Nate was not shallow at this point in his life and was the bookish type before becoming jaded and much like other guys. Further, the narrator paints a portrait of Amy as seen through Nate's eyes, as "the stacked blonde siren of their class, whose bashfully averted eyes and modest smile were nicely offset by her clingy sweaters and ass-hugging jeans" (18).

One could argue that Chapter 2 and even the entire novel falls into the category of anti-Bildungsroman, anti-coming of age; in most stories labeled as Bildungsroman, you have a character who is sensitive, going in search of answers to life's questions. In this novel, we have a character that does not purposely set out to grow or develop, but rather, ends up devolving in a sense, going from perceptive to self-deceiving. Chapter 2 does serve up a delightfully odd coming-of-age quirk of Nate's, typical for a coming-of-age story. This is when he searches for erotic inspiration in his parents' bedroom. Realizing that women too have dirty thoughts when he finds a racy book belonging to his mother, he sniffs the hair scrunchy he swiped off Amy Perleman and hides in the back of his bottom desk drawer. Forgetting about it, years later, he is exposed when his college girlfriend Kristen spots it and asks why he has it. He answers that it must belong to his mom.

The author purposely inserts moments of authenticity as a contrast to Nate's current mentality, such as when he shares a quiet, insightful moment with Michelle Goldstein, one poignantly described. As mentioned in the summary, Nate was not at first like his male friends Todd and Mike; there was "something that rubbed Nate wrong" about them,



their “attitude toward girls—their implicit belief that whatever befell a foolish or unattractive one was her just deserts. Empathy, they reserved for the best-looking girls” (21). Note the stark contrast of this early viewpoint of Nate’s to his later insensitive attitude about a young woman “who would decide to have a baby and thus become, in the vacuous, public service announcements jargon of the day, ‘a statistic’” (3).

While Chapter 2 opens with a direct style, it does not directly lay claim to Nate’s treatment of Justine near the end of the chapter as setting him on the path to asshole territory; however, it insinuates that this is the case in the scenes with Justine. When she starts to cry, saying that she guesses her ex Noah was right, who cruelly told her that she needed to get breast implants if any guy was going to want her. Obligated “to disprove this prince, Nate said he’d be there in twenty minutes” (33). The pity Nate feels for her does not transition into romantic feelings. Nate, unbeknownst to himself, is turning into the kind of guy he used to despise.

Discussion Question 1

Do you agree with the assessment that this is your typical coming-of-age story or Bildungsroman? Whatever your answer, justify it with contextual evidence.

Discussion Question 2

Do you take Nate’s reasons for breaking up with Kristen at face value? Explain.

Discussion Question 3

Why does the novel turn into a typical biography of its main protagonist in Chapter 2? How does this move help with character development?

Vocabulary

wunderkind, bard, verisimilitude, requisition, equipage, hiatus, autoerotic, reeked, debilitating, nebulous, melancholic, coup de tat, ambiguous, foreclosed, entangled, repulsive, sublime, auto-didactic, mediocrity, extravagance, debutantes, amenities, edification, dexterously, nonchalance, wayward, tentatively, ardent, meritocratic, fatuous, implementation, premed, acerbic, hierarchy, leavened, dispelled, rectitude



Chapter 3

Summary

Returning to the present, we find Nate staring at his computer screen with a long, dense message from Hannah wherein she continues the conversation started at Elisa's dinner party. She writes in the vein of Nate's essay topic, that of indifference to suffering. She ends on the friendly note that she had much fun with him and that it had been nice talking to him. His reaction to this apparent connection? Hesitance. He does not quite understand this hesitation on his part, but is not quite ready to write his "commodification-of conscience essay" (36) either. So he replies, and on goes their rumination on invisible exploitation.

Their emails prove to be intelligent, Hannah displaying nuanced insights. She questions him on his assumption that moderns have normalized indifference to suffering. Child labor was tolerated back in Dickens's time in a way it is not now, thereby proving that our conception of what is socially acceptable has changed. This gets Nate thinking that her insight is something he needs to address in his essay. The time she takes to exchange ideas with Nate makes him consider the implications, that she must be interested in him, which leaves him feeling wary. He asks himself why he is wary and arrives at a possible answer: Hannah is friends with his ex Elisa. But then again, there was no proof that they really were that good of friends. So, something else contributed to his apprehension. Was it something about her looks? The "stark line of her eye-brows and the pointiness of her features that wasn't exactly pretty" (39) or that "while she had a nice body, she was on the tall side and had something of the loose-limbed quality of a comic actor, goofy and self-conscious, good-humored but perhaps also a bit asexual" (39). Here we have the judgmental Nate we have come to know.

For about three pages, we stay in Nate's mind, his thoughts as to himself in relation to women, how he used to think he would be less shallow about women and their appearance when he got older, but how now as a grown-up this expectation has not come to fruition. Still, he does not think he was that shallow in comparison to his far colder friends whose attitudes were far worse. Note the poignant way the narrator puts it: "as if the tenderer feelings that had animated the crushes of their younger years had been spent. What emerged in their place was the cool eye of the seasoned appraiser, who above all knows how to calculate the market" (39). But no—not Nate. He never viewed women this way.

Finally, he determines that the problem, the wariness he feels has nothing to do with Hannah's looks. He just did not want to type of relationship he had with Kristen. Exactly why he would think a relationship with Hannah would be like the one with Kristen, the narrator does not make clear. All this reminds him of what happened with Juliet, how upset she had been. Then Elisa. He recalls how when the others left her dinner party she tried to kiss him. He could not believe she was going to put them through this chaos all over again. Yet, in a rare moment of self-realization, he realizes that he shared some



blame. Further, he realizes more: “Contrary to what these women seemed to think, he was not indifferent to their unhappiness. And yet he seemed, in spite of himself, to provoke it” (40). Disappointingly, right after this insightful moment, he returns to blaming women; now that he was in his thirties, the world was full of women no longer preoccupied with their careers but rather with relationships. Yet as for Hannah, maybe he was being presumptuous; maybe she just wanted to be friends. He presumptuously when imagines that her friendliness means she wants to have sex with him.

Nate lingers on how his male friends, particularly Jason, would see all of this. Jason had once advised Nate not to over think things, and that doing so made him like a girl, the type of advice that Nate despised. Nate seems to care too much about what his friends think.

Nate feels emasculated because he has not had sex for two months. His preoccupation with it used to make him worry that he was a sex addict, but he has now decided to just give into his every sexual whim and desire and sleep with any and every woman he can.

Analysis

One issue that recurs and is thus important to the novel, particularly in Chapter 3, is the topic of Nate’s essay, liberal guilt. Hannah continues the dinner party conversation on Nate’s essay theme in her emails to him, and so the subject prevails as one important to their generation. The novel, in fact, deals with the tension between liberal guilt and liberal apathy. Chapter 3 continues to propound the same style as the previous two chapters, obsessed with Nate’s character as representative of the demographic focal to the novel: Brooklyn’s young literati.

The email Nate gets from Hannah compels him to self analyze; why does the email exchange make him wearisome? He pictures Hannah at Elisa’s dinner party, which leads him to nit-pick her looks. This is the Nate we have come to recognize, finding fault and justifying his hesitance once the possibility of a real romance materializes. When he judges other guys as worse than him in shallowness, the wonderful metaphor for childhood innocence vs. jadedness serves to idealize the freshness of childhood in contrast to the harshness of adulthood: “Many of his friends were far colder and more connoisseur-like in their attitudes toward women’s appearances, as if the tenderer feelings that had animated the crushes of their younger years had been spent” (39). When he decides that the problem with Hannah was his fear of a relationship similar to the one with Kristen, one cannot help but think that he perceives a strong-willed thoughtful woman as a threat. Here the epigraph of the novel comes to mind: sincerity is not enough when self-scrutinizing, or even when one is well-intended. Nate ought to not only take a good hard look at his record with women, but consider the interests of others besides his own.

Though rare, Nate has somewhat of an epiphany when he realizes that he had done his share to create this situation with Elisa when she tried to come on to him and rehashed



the problems with their past relationship. He is well aware now that though he did not intend to contribute to their unhappiness, he did so anyway. But in the same moment of insight, Nate reverts back to selfishness in assuming Hannah is interested sexually.

Discussion Question 1

What aspects of liberal guilt trouble Nate?

Discussion Question 2

Nate seems to be obsessed with his friend Jason's opinions. Why do you think this is so?

Discussion Question 3

What does Jason's character symbolize?

Vocabulary

oppressively, adjacent, acquisitive, spindly, revitalization, verdant, congealed, rancid, squalor, fetid, detritus, gesticulative, pundit, bulbous, doyenne, telegenic, priggish, culpable, bathetic



Chapter 4

Summary

When Hannah meets Nate at a bar for drinks, she reminds him of an attractive, hippie girl he once knew in high school. Her resemblance to Emily Kovans sparks nostalgia for his youth. They learn about each other's background, such as how Hannah grew up in Ohio and went to Barnard for journalism school. Hannah is a freelance writer like Nate, though not as far along yet. She is currently trying to get a book contract and he reassures her that it will happen. Nate finds her more interesting than he had expected; she offers novelty for him. When Hannah asks him what he wanted when he graduated high school, he says he wanted to both do something interesting and to be admired for it.

When Hannah offers to pay for the next round of drinks, Nate cannot help, once again, being concerned with Jason's opinion. Jason's theory was that women who offered to pay on dates have low self-esteem. Jason would never go out with someone like Hannah, whom he would rate a mere seven. Nate muses on how he very much dislikes the idea that he is dating someone Jason would not, which seems wrong since he considers himself the better man of the two. He cuts his meandering thoughts off, realizing that it is not very helpful to think along these lines. Yet he continues to go back and forth in his assessment of Hannah as romantic material throughout the rest of their date that night.

Nate comments on the sad state of literature and how the world takes reading for granted. He can empathize with feeling irrelevant when lame TV shows sell better than a book. Hannah disagrees, saying that she thinks "its vanity to want it both ways...to want to write books because that's your thing but also to want to be treated like a rock star" (53). He judges Hannah to be somewhat unfeminine in her position; he believes that women tend to be teachers rather than aesthetes. Adding to his portrayal as sexist, he "felt intuitively that she was paraphrasing someone else (a professor? Nabokov's Lectures on Literature?) and that someone else was a man" (53).

Although he vacillates in his feelings about Hannah during their date, he comes to realize that he likes the conversation they are having and believes he is not doing what he usually does, which is to go "through the motions of having a conversation with" a woman he is interested in "while privately articulating her tics and mental limitations" (54). He throws caution to the wind by the end of the night by making out with her and telling himself to just enjoy the moment.

Analysis

A powerful metaphor for the lost innocence of youth occurs again in Chapter 4 when Nate reflects on Hannah's resemblance to Emily Kovans. The narrator states that Nate



“didn’t know then [back in high school] that the ability to feel the kind of sincere and unqualified longing he felt for Emily would pass from him, fall away like outgrown skin” (48). Further, his “current self” is described as “considerably more louche—buffeted by short-lived, largely prurient desires, whose gratification he no longer believed would make him happy, at least not for long” (48). Paradoxically, while suffering from a lack of self-awareness, Nate seems to ultimately realize that his present self and behavior will not bring him happiness; therefore, we can argue that he is a paradox himself.

Another metaphor comes into play when Hannah asks Nate what he most wanted as a youth, and he answers that he wanted to both do something interesting and be interesting. He remembers his “belief that success was something that just happened to you, that you just did your thing, and if you were deserving, it was bestowed by the same invisible hand that ensured that the deli would have milk to drink and sandwiches to buy” (50). What makes him nostalgic for his youth is what he has learned from being an adult and the years behind him, that life is a lot more complicated than that simplistic vision.

It is not a very flattering picture of Nate that we get when the narrator tells us that Nate sees Hannah as unfeminine. He thinks this when she says she does not care too much about what others do for fun, including if they do not read. Here again we see a touch of sexism, wherein he surmises that women are naturally disposed to being teachers or educators, and that Hannah is relying on a man’s words rather than her own to back up her strong opinions.

Nate’s character is magnified in this chapter as being wishy-washy and indecisive. One minute he is enjoying his conversation with his date, Hannah, the next he is internally judging her appearance and personality. On the positive side, he realizes he was actually enjoying authentic communication without internally judging her every trait or looking for faults and limitations, paradoxical, considering we were just given a glimpse of his assessments of her. Still, he is far from bored with Hannah. Though hesitant to move forward with her, he throws caution to the wind when he ends the night by making out with her.

Discussion Question 1

What effect does nostalgia have on Nate’s relationships?

Discussion Question 2

What attitude does Chapter 4 take toward Jason’s character?

Discussion Question 3

What attitude does Chapter 4 take toward Nate’s fickleness?

Vocabulary

louche, buffeted, prurient, archness, sordid, ossify, appendage, teetotaler



Chapter 5

Summary

Chapter 5 is broken into two sections. The first is basically a lengthy internal monologue Nate has as he scrubs his coffeepot and moves to his bedroom. The second section narrates Nate's second date with Hannah.

Nate first thinks about Hannah and how much fun he had with her on their first date. Unlike most women he knows, she is both reasonable and intellectual. He wonders whether he might be something of a misogynist considering that women often complained that he admired mostly dead white men as writers. He admits to himself that he prefers inherently masculine writing. The author really makes the case in this chapter for agreeing that yes, Nate is misogynistic; he judges all women on the basis of the women he knows, including Aurit, who is one of the smartest women he knows but whom he judges harshly for basing her subjects on her life. This he thinks is what differentiates women from men. Women "were more likely to base judgments on a thing's message, whether or not it was one they approved of, whether it was something that 'needed saying'" (59), whereas men were more likely to be disinterested aesthetically, clearly the better of the two tendencies.

His thoughts turn to his apartment and how much he enjoys his "particular brand of squalor" (59). He likes to think of himself as distinguished from those others who chose domestic living. Interestingly, we are told at this point in the narrative that Nate suffers from a kind of depression, maybe even bipolar disorder, described this way: "Nate's day-to-day life was characterized by bursts of productivity punctuated by downward slides into lethargy, loneliness, filth and gloom. His bad moods had a self-perpetuating quality" (59). He wonders at his own low bouts considering that things are going relatively well; his writing is mostly productive.

In his bedroom, Nate opens the window and takes in the moment, admiring the view. He actually appreciates his block's ugliness, how it is juxtaposed with fashionable restaurants and bars. It is this unfashionableness that he loves. His 'liberal guilt' sneaks in again as he muses on how "he only superficially lives among the poor" (60). He recognizes there is a stratification of residents, that the only thing they have in common is the cash that flows through their hands.

Turning his thoughts back to Hannah and how he finds her confidence in contradicting him and her unfeminine outfit as altogether sexy. Juliet, by contrast laid claim to being courageous in speaking her mind, but did so aggressively. His guilt returns for leading her on, but then he switches to blaming "these women" who "ought to have listened when he told them he wasn't looking for anything serious" (62). He starts to internally play the blaming game. If he had been more ethical, he would not have taken advantage of their optimism and assumption that men wanted connection as much as they did. He absolves himself in this when he asks, "Based on what? On whom?" (62).



Yearning to see Hannah again, and against some apprehension, he calls her the next day. They meet at a bistro restaurant where they talk about their upbringing, he with middle-class immigrant parents, and she with a father in the auto industry and a mother who was the popular girl. They go to her place and when he makes a pass at her, she resists, offering for him to stay over, but clarifying that they will not have sex. This surprises Nate, but he says he is fine with it; he decides he can tolerate living without sex for a time but preferred not to get into a long-winded conversation over it. When he asks if her choice not to have sex has something to do with her being Catholic, she jokes, saying, “No. It has to do with your being Jewish” (72). This clever response makes Nate laugh, and he feels less awkward now about the whole thing. He says he really would like to stay, and she says it would be just fine.

Analysis

In Chapter 5, the author means for the reader to sympathize with Nate, empathize even when we are told about his shifts in mood, a particular kind of depression ranging from lethargy to high energy. While his misogyny is made more apparent in the first part of this chapter, many of us can relate to that empty feeling that we all experience even when things are going well.

The narrator spends some time describing Nate’s residence and livelihood to portray more than just this one character’s life, but rather the Brooklyn community he lives in. Nate’s internal monologue on the “ubergentrification” of his block re-iterates the class differences that he feels guilty about; in realizing he “only superficially lived among the poor” (61), he demonstrates keen insight, if not with women, at least in his sense of social justice. This part of the chapter also serves to portray conflicted intentions, the ironic tension between wanting to separate oneself from class distinctions but yet remaining a part of it.

Chapter 5 emphasizes the paradox of Nate’s slanted view of women and his admiration for a woman like Hannah who challenges his very notion of what most women are like. While assuming that women rely more on their feelings than intellect, he recognizes Hannah’s strong intellect. Here again the reader has room for empathizing with Nate as a contradiction in terms, that a person does not have to be all one thing or another, but a blend or paradox in his own right.

Discussion Question 1

Is Nate a misogynist? Give examples from Chapter 5 to support your answer.

Discussion Question 2

What accounts for Nate’s changing moods? Does he show signs of manic depression?



Discussion Question 3

Why does Chapter 5 spend so much time on Nate's living environment? What do these descriptions have to do with his character?

Vocabulary

timorous, tribalism, ken, taut, carafe, wan, hermetic, garret, squalor, utilitarianism, culled, squalid, slough, repose, yuppie, vestiges, ubergentrification, guttural, repository, austere, detritus, banquettes, conspicuous, ethereal, stultifying, peruse, languorous



Chapter 6

Summary

In the first half of Chapter 6, most of the narrative occurs in a scene between Nate and Aurit, a secondary character becomes more prominent. The narrative portrays Aurit through Nate's eyes, wherein he is reminded of one of Dr. Seuss' characters, the ever-judgmental Lorax. He harps on her physical appearance as, "short and big on top, with large maternal breasts and broad shoulders that were like the top of a triangle, tapering to petite hips that she liked to show off in close-fitting jeans" (74). He assumes that the reason they never got romantically involved because he had never been attracted to her, besides the fact that when they started hanging out he was already dating Elisa.

Aurit is headstrong and opinionated. She grills Nate over his second date with Hannah and criticizes his lateness in calling her. Nate emphasizes that it had been four nights ago that "they had alternately talked and engaged in what felt like a prolonged and fairly innocent bout of adolescent groping" and that it "had been pretty nice, though" (76). Aurit calls him out when she straightforwardly sums up his dealings with women, hitting the nail on the head so to speak: "[Y]ou happen to go out with a girl a couple of times, spend the night with her—who cares if you actually slept together?—but for you, it's out of sight, out of mind. As soon as she's not in the room, you're back in Nateland. What about her?" (77). Aurit believes that Hanna is someone that might actually be good for Nate. Continuing her assessment of Nate's love life, she says that he usually picks the wrong women who are pretty and so he finds reasons to be interested, but then when it does not work out he acts like the woman is the problem or relationships in general rather than seeing that the problem is in the women he chooses.

As Aurit berates Nate, Greer Cohen, the writer scorned at Elisa's dinner party, shows up. He sees her in an unflattering light, as artificial in manner and reeking "of a manufactured sexiness more tartish than slutty, like a pinup girl from the 1940's" (80). He remembers the argument they had at a recent party where they disagreed in their views on men, women, and sex. According to Nate, there is a double standard when it comes to sex; it is socially acceptable for women to turn down sex, but not for men. Women are offended when a man says no. Greer takes exception to Nate's narrow perspective, judging it and him. Still, he leers at Geer and her breasts as "snug in an olive-green tank top, were his favorite size, just big enough to fill a wine glass (a red one)" (81).

The second half of Chapter 6 follows the pattern of several chapters in the novel, narrating Nate's interior monologue, for the most part. Thinking of Hannah again, he regrets not calling her the day after his dinner with Aurit, though he had been compelled to wait the extra day in defiance of Aurit's assumptions. Although he waits six days to get in touch with her, Hannah does not sound disappointed or tearfully reproached. She agrees that they should do something. In the meantime, Nate feels good that his book is about to be released soon and the fact that it would be in bookstores across America



made it all feel more real. He feels extremely gracious and tolerant of other people only because of this good news. He realizes that what makes him mildly anticipatory about seeing Hannah again is because they could both be “the new-person versions of themselves: attentive, polite, and good-humored” (83). It seems he knows himself well enough that he can predict how this good natured side of himself will not last as everything tends to fade.

He agrees to Hannah’s terms not to have sex when he asks her out again, which is one reason why he was hesitant about calling her sooner. After she made it clear she did not want to have sex just yet, it would be all the harder to tell her was not looking for something serious. If he really wanted to be in a relationship he would, but at this time in his life he feels fulfilled from work and friends; he does not need a relationship to be happy. He believes women want so badly to be in a relationship because they hate being alone and once again in a misogynistic attitude, he claims that women “aren’t noble, high-minded individuals, concerned about the well-being of the nation or the continuity of the species” (85). Yet, “no matter how unfair they are,” he continues musing internally, “no matter how insanely bent on domestication,” he “was unable to entirely discount the claims of women—those he slept with or might sleep with” (86). After all this vacillating back and forth in his thoughts about Hannah and about women in general, Nate gives in to his “asshole” tendency and writes a new message to Hannah making excuses for why he has to cancel their date. After he sends the message, relief washes over him.

Analysis

Aurit's role in the story of Nate and his love affairs becomes all the more important in the first part of Chapter 6 ; she makes Nate question the authenticity of his own feelings. As the narrator puts it, he had “nearly been convinced of a false account of his own feelings merely because Aurit was emphatic” (75). Because she calls him out on the way he handles his relationship with women, we can interpret her character as symbolic of one aspect of Nate’s conscience, a more critical and honest one. However, the reliability of Aurit’s voice is called into question when she is compared to the Dr. Suess’s Lorax when we are told that she is overly demanding and headstrong, only seeing her opinions as of value and importance. Finding a character like Aurit paradoxical is not surprising considering that the main character of Nate is paradoxical too. These two characters then, are by no means flat, but complex in that they are hard to pin down. Nate fuels frustration on the one hand and empathy on the other.

Nate muses on how his “real self”—the one that is “magnanimous and engaged” materializes only occasionally, and “New people brought him out” (83). This revelation is key to understanding what might lead to disappointing relationships for Nate. One of his problems when it comes to relationships with women is that he quickly tires of the novelty of the thing. Further, receiving good news, such as of the sale of his book brought out this magnanimous side; in other words, when things were not going well, he had less tolerance for people in general. Here again we have a complex character, not easy to place in a nice neat box.



In taking the easy way out, cancelling their next date, Nate shows himself once again to be commitment-phobic. While he does not wish to spoil the fun dynamic he has with Hannah, he also does not wish to be forced into a relationship.

Discussion Question 1

What role does Aurit play in Nate's crisis?

Discussion Question 2

What makes Aurit's character paradoxical?

Discussion Question 3

What do you think will happen with the character of Greer? Is this the last time we will see her?

Vocabulary

effusive, gaunt, sycophants, diminutive, frivolous, fraught, meritocracy, anatomized, bourgeois, placating, congenial, demographic, tartish, prognostications, haranguing, veneers, roiled, baroque



Chapter 7

Summary

The first part of Chapter 7 occurs in scene at a reading of one of Nate's acquaintances, set first in a bookstore in lower Manhattan and then at a nearby bar. To summarize the gist of the scene, Nate is starting to realize that he is fond of Hannah and regrets cancelling their next date when he finds the women at the book launch un-interesting by comparison.

Nate chats with a girl he finds attractive at the bar named Cara, a Stanford graduate who earned a writing degree from John Hopkins. She is clearly smart, but Nate finds her boring. What irritates him about her is that she does not attempt to be witty or engaging. Nate's friend Mark says that he thinks Cara is interested in him and basically asks Nate's permission to make a move. Of course, because Nate is bored with her, he tells Mark to go for it. Nate goes back into the bar where he muses on how the "night simply seemed empty, almost pointless" (94).

The next day, he calls Hannah and suggests they meet up. Playing off as aloof, Hannah says she just may have a free evening. When they do meet at a café at Bryant Park for a free evening concert, Nate finds himself surprisingly nervous. He brings her a book she might like, Graham Greene's *Travels with My Aunt*. He had agreed to this outing for her sake, not his, as he finds these kinds of performances grating and pretentious, "upper middle-class New Yorkers' love of high culture in city parks. It was so full of self-congratulation, as if a few lousy performances made up for systemic economic inequality" (96).

Nate tells Hannah that Bryant Park contains drug dealers and villainous characters, according to a sociologist he admires, William Whyte. Hannah finds this fact amusing and remembers reading something Nate had written about Whyte, hesitating for a brief moment before acknowledging his essay as good. Her assessment makes Nate feel self-conscious, wondering what Hannah really thinks about his writing. By the end of their date, Nate feels like he is right where he wants to be and places his hand on her lower back gently.

Analysis

The references to social concerns in Chapter 7, such as urban poverty and economic inequality emphasizes one of the main themes of the novel, the guilt that some members of the middle class like Nate feel over systemic inequality. Nate is not the only one with this concern, but several of his friends and others of his demographic as well.

We continue to see the tug-of-war Nate internally experiences over both this social issue and in his mixed feelings over Hannah. The pang he feels that night at the bar aligns with his relationship history: he starts off apprehensive before diving in. The



shallow, boring conversations he has at the book reading only confirms his interest in Hannah, which moves him to take action and see her again.

The juxtaposing of Mark's character to Nate's creates the sense that perhaps even though Nate can be labeled a jerk, by comparison, the other males in his circle are worse. When Mark expresses sexual interest in Cara, remarking that he would sleep with her no matter whether what she had to say was interesting or not, Nate feels the opposite. The old Nate would probably have placed physical attraction over mental or emotional, but now he has his reservations.

Although Nate displays paranoid traits when Hannah evaluates his essay apprehensively as good, his reaction, albeit internal, seems to foreshadow possible problems in their relationship later over differences in literary taste and tendencies. For now, Hannah interests Nate enough for him to feel glad to be exactly where he is.

Discussion Question 1

Considering that the topic of liberal guilt and social inequality recurs again in Chapter 7, what worldview would you say the novel espouses?

Discussion Question 2

What problem does Nate find with the love upper middle-class New Yorkers have for high culture?

Discussion Question 3

What was the pang that Nate felt when he thought of Hannah that night after the reading?

Vocabulary

prurient, bilious, affront, glowering, scraggly, guffawing, minutiae, acquiescence, lugubriously, panache, convivial



Chapter 8

Summary

Chapter 8 consists of the early stages of Nate's blooming relationship with Hannah, the time they spend together which seems "like the real awake time" (104) to Nate. It turns out that the ban she had placed on sex that first time they spent the night together, she rescinded on the night of the park concert date. Nate is pleased with how different Hannah is compared to previous women he dated, who had been overly sheltered and sensitive. In getting to know her writing style, Nate likes that Hannah's writing is lucid yet wonderfully acerbic. In particular, he actually enjoys her insinuations of doubts about him, how she has not yet made up her mind completely. He too has not necessarily changed his mind about not wanting to be in a relationship.

Nate finds sex with Hannah satisfying. It feels "urgent, feverish, as if there had been a tremendous amount of buildup, rather than just a few weeks' worth." In fact, he wants to take things slower this time. They narrate each other's lives to each other for the following weeks, Hannah talking about her ex, Steve, with whom she had had a four year relationship. Nate tells her about the girl he had lost his virginity to, all typical early romance conversation.

Nate tells Hannah about the evolution of his book, how at first the central character was someone like him, the son of immigrant parents, "from whose lips precocious wit and wisdom would flow and whose struggles — girls and popularity — would arouse readers' sympathy" (104). The novel only came together when "this 'insufferable' character had been shunted to the sidelines, in favor of the parents, with their quietly troubled marriage and off-kilter but also in certain ways sharp-sighted responses to American life" (104).

Chapter 8 ends with Nate taking Hannah to a party hosted by one of Nate's female acquaintances, Francesca. The narrator spends some time in Nate's head as he reflects on Francesca's wolfish ways, how she reminds him of women "whose legs, like the doors to an exclusive club, parted only at the proof of a man's success" (105). Hannah meets Nate's friends Jason and Eugene who compliments Hannah as attractive. Jason, on the other hand, merely remarks that she seems nice, and Nate feels guilty, "hating himself because the number seven flitted across his mind" (107). Here we are reminded that Nate seems to place too much weight on Jason's opinions on the women he dates. The night's banter leads Hannah to the conclusion that she likes Jason, despite Nate's apologizing for him. Back at her apartment, Hannah expresses how the past few weeks have been great and how really happy she has been. Nate agrees.



Analysis

As Nate grows in his fondness for Hannah and clearly moves toward starting a relationship with her, even though he had been nearly resolved not to, one cannot help but hold one's breath, waiting for Nate to potentially mess things up. The narrator up to this point in the novel has done an excellent job portraying Nate's tendencies with women he dates, how the newness at first excites him only to eventually overwhelm his capacity (or lack) to stay committed to making a relationship work. One hopes that it will be different this time since he feels that Hannah is different from other women he has dated. But let us not forget that Kristen had seemed to be a good girlfriend for him, yet he managed to find fault with her, enough to convince himself it would not work.

One is tempted by this part of the novel to sympathize with Nate, how he appears to be at least trying to make a success out of this blooming relationship. When he and Hannah first have sex, he wants to take it slower so as not to mess it up. In this sense, the novel stays true to its resolve not to lay outright judgment on Nate but to, rather, leave it to the reader to decide.

In Chapter 8, we finally get a better idea of what Nate's novel is about, the one he got such a big advance on. Now that we know it originally focused on a young man that very much resembles him and that he changed the focus to the immigrant parents of the man, we can surmise that the novel must be somewhat autobiographical. What attitude does the novel take on the nature of Nate's book? He calls it a novel, and yet the story revolves around a family that sounds very much like his own. The author does not necessarily take a hard and fast stance on genre, but rather raises a question of what makes for fiction versus nonfiction, or memoir and creative nonfiction. The question remains a difficult one to answer in the literary world just as it does in this parody of a rising literary star.

Discussion Question 1

Does Nate demonstrate that he is ready for a relationship? If so, how? If not, explain.

Discussion Question 2

What is your attitude toward Hannah at this point? Does she seem different from Nate's previous relationships?

Discussion Question 3

Why does Nate seem so concerned about Jason's opinions?

Vocabulary

blinkered, acerbic, docilely, taut, sinewy, Quotidian, funereal, nepotistic, pensively, reticence, transubstantiation, pontificating, ebullient, tenuous



Chapter 9

Summary

In the relatively short Chapter 9, Nate thinks about Hannah and their relationship in light of the opinion of his friends, including the ones who hold the most sway over him - Aurit and Jason.

The first part of Chapter 9 occurs at a picnic at Prospect Park where some friends are celebrating their City Hall marriage. Aurit, eager to find out how their relationship is going, asks Nate how long he and Hannah have been seeing each other. They first went out six weeks prior and began seeing each other in earnest for about a month. Aurit says she is happy for Nate, but instead of taking this remark in stride, Nate takes this as an opportunity to complicate what he considers as Aurit's narrow point of view. He does this by stating that none of this is a big deal and saying that he has no idea where this will go. The point he hopes to make is that their romantic relationship is not all-consuming as if there was nothing else going on in his life. It "shared space in his mind with other things—with his interest in thinking abstractly, about things other than his personal life, for one, even with his interest in sports" (114). He finds it difficult to get this point across to Aurit without implying that somehow he is unhappy with Hannah.

Nate observes his surroundings at the park, noting that the "park was a liberal integrationist's wet dream: multiracial, multiethnic, multi-class" (115), Nate being one of those liberals. After his conversation with Aurit, Nate spots Jason on a picnic blanket. Like Aurit, Jason also asks about Hannah, asking her whereabouts. Nate feels his jaws tighten and responded curtly and defensively that he and Hannah are not attached at the hip. When his cell phone rings, Jason prods further, asking if it is Hannah. Nate hits the decline button to make Hannah's name disappear from the screen. He retaliates by asking Jason when the last time was that he got laid, who was president, etc. They banter back and forth, with Jason admitting that he thought Hannah was mousy at first but that now he thinks she is cool. Nate is glad to hear it, but also embarrassed that he should give such weight to Jason's opinions. Jason eggs Nate on a bit further by asking if Nate has told Elisa yet about Hannah. Nate almost lashes out at Nate, but in checking himself, says he plans to, that he has not gotten around to it yet.

Nate meets with Elisa a few days later and is surprised to find she is madder at Hannah than at him. He notices how unhappy Elisa seems and after apologizing about Hannah he tries to pacify her by saying he is sure she will meet someone someday. Expecting her to rail into him, he is further surprised when she foregoes the usual route of making him feel guilty about poisoning all future relationships and changing his mind about her. She apologizes for her behavior after her dinner party. Nate reflects on how he had gotten much of his book written while with Elisa, so that in "a way, she had been essential to his writing it" (121). Nate feels a great relief wash over him when he is done with Elisa. He immediately sends Hannah a text saying how much he misses her even though they just saw each other that morning. He reaches the point of feeling especially



grateful to her, for the “light, easy banter he and Hannah tended toward—the implicit reassurance of her presence that he wasn’t a heartless ingrate” (121).

Analysis

By now, a common thread or common concern in the novel has become apparent in Chapter 9, that of the connection between one’s relationships (romantic and otherwise) and one’s solitude. Nate seems to be battling his individualist nature, his desire to be independent as opposed to any need or desire to be in a relationship. He also struggles with how to handle the various opinions his friends have on his life, his behavior and relationships.

Interestingly, the two people that currently have the strongest influence on Nate take opposing viewpoints on his relationship with Hannah. There is Aurit, who believes that romantic relationships are most important for a full and rich human existence. She also happens to like Hannah for Nate and encourages, even pressures him not to blow it. On the other hand is Jason, whose personal taste for shallow, beautiful women influences Nate to the point of shaming him. Considering that this chapter is not the first to consist of scenes with Aurit and Jason in relation to Nate and Hannah, the novel emphasizes that Nate’s hyper-awareness of his friends’ values contributes to his relationship ills.

Finally, when Nate compares Elisa to Hannah, relief sweeping over him that he has resolved things with Elisa, we see the role that Hannah plays in his current life. She makes him feel good about himself, helping him come to terms with the guilt he feels over past failed relationships. Her presence in his life reassures him that he is not the “heartless ingrate” (121) he feels he has been or has been accused of by past girlfriends. These positive feelings may or may not be enough to make their relationship work.

Discussion Question 1

On page 115, where Nate reflects on Prospect Park and that it is “a liberal integrationist’s wet dream” (115), what do you think he means? Is he being sincere or ironic? Explain.

Discussion Question 2

How would you describe the relationship between Nate and Jason?

Discussion Question 3

Is Nate with Hannah only because she makes him feel good about himself? Predict what you think will happen to their relationship and explain why you think this will be the case.

Vocabulary

virulent, effusions, distended, effete, flicked, monomania, demurral, integrationist, squirrely, smarmy, lurched, implicit



Chapter 10

Summary

The whole of Chapter 10 covers Nate's history with Elisa at the behest of Hannah's inquiry. The night of the wedding picnic, Nate stays with Hannah and she asks what the deal had been with him and Elisa. The narrator says that "Nate paused before answering" (123), then relates their past.

Nate met Elisa three years prior at a publishing party. She had attended Brown and the Sorbonne and earned her master's in comp lit. She was at her first job in publishing and wanted to be a writer. Nate was impressed by her knowledge of avant-garde films and how she differed from editorial types he had dated in that she was "unusually serious and well informed," young and attractive (124). She struck him as "clearly first-rate, top-shelf, the publishing equivalent of Amy Perelman in high school and Will McDormand's best-looking gals at Harvard: she was the thing that was clearly, indisputably desirable" (124). He dated her to rise in status, and stayed with her, despite realizing that she was not the nicest girlfriend. Self-indulgent, none of his desires mattered to her unless they coincided with hers. For example, at a dinner party, she scolded him for embarrassing her when he made a bad joke. But he grew dependent on her so much so that their relationship became codependent: "Elisa's presence in his life, in his bed, her beauty (sometimes when he was with her he was simply overcome with desire to touch her silky blonde hair or perfect doll face), the particular pains and pleasures of being with her: these had become, for him, existentially necessary" (127).

Early on though, Nate discovered that Elisa's "writing was often stilted and awkward" (127) and that her passion for types of literature were imitations of intellectuals in her life, including her father who was a renowned professor, taking on their opinions for show. She valued what they valued. He also realized, to his dismay, that she was "pathologically attracted not to status or money or good looks but to literary and intellectual potential" (128), which she found in Nate. He began to do what he had become good at with women he dated, "cataloging her inadequacies for future reference" (129). By the time they had been together around a year, he questioned why he was with her, his dissatisfaction overwhelming him. His dissatisfaction increased while his interest decreased and eventually he felt guilty for staying with her, sensing that he was taking advantage of her. Even with her pleadings, he broke up with her, but continued for a time to have sex with her. Then it hit him that he was guilty: "Nate had glommed onto Elisa from reptilian ambition. And then, like a dog that sniffs at a foreign object before deciding it doesn't interest him, he trotted off, on to other attractions. Except his experiment hadn't been so painless for Elisa" (132). He quieted down the judge in his head, taking it for untrustworthy because "it assumed, problematically, that he was smarter and stronger than Elisa and thus solely responsible for everything that happened between them" (133). Right or wrong, he chose to ignore this inner voice, again struggling between his individualism and need for friendships and relationships.



He acknowledged his fault in hurting Elisa and so told her he would never abandon her, which as a friend he never did.

After this lengthy pause, rather than telling Hannah all of this, Nate just tells her that he and Elisa went out for awhile, that it did not work out but that they are friends.

Analysis

The author waits until more than halfway through the novel, Chapter 10, to narrate Nate's significant relationship with Elisa. Cleverly using flashback to flesh out their relationship, which was referenced in passing in earlier chapters, the reader could miss the cue in the opening paragraph that what is to follow is not necessarily what Nate tells Hannah, but that it is all a recollection in his mind.

Perhaps in this chapter more so than others, the reliability of Nate's point of view can be called into question when it comes to the description of Elisa and her faults. Since we are told about Elisa and their relationship fully from Nate's perspective, we either buy into his assessment of her or question it. It is up to the reader to determine whether or not his views are fair, judicious, or merely one-sided.

Chapter 10 gives more insight into Nate's destructive tendencies in connection to relationships; he clung on to a bad relationship (with Elisa) because he fell prey to making the relationship the prime thing to make him feel alive and of significance. No wonder that when he is with Hannah, he fights against losing himself in a relationship. The reader can certainly empathize with how easy it is to fall prey to this danger, especially when one is not where one wants to be in life.

If Nate's feelings are mixed, the reader's are all the more so, from a narration that vacillates constantly between wanting to be good and running away as far as possible when things get tough. One cannot help judge Nate as being a jerk for having sex with Elisa even after they have broken up; but at the same time, he really does not abandon her, but tries to be her friend and support her when she faces problems at her job. His relationship with Elisa had been crucial to his growth, for other than Elisa, Kristen had been his only other serious relationship. Since she berated him often, tearing down his self-esteem - at least according to his internal monologue - we can assume that his experience with her helped shape his current behavior with Hannah. He lost himself in that relationship, so now he is extra sensitive to letting the same thing happen with Hannah.

Discussion Question 1

Is Nate's internal monologue fully reliable? Where do you see instances of bias?



Discussion Question 2

What is the novel's attitude toward the character of Elisa, taking earlier chapters into account?

Discussion Question 3

Why does Nate not tell Hannah about his relationship with Elisa when he told her about previous girlfriends like Kristen?

Vocabulary

anhedonic, surreptitiously, avuncular, eschewed, regaling, pedantically, innocuous, aperçus, mawkishness, recrimination, stentorian, appertaining, nubile



Chapter 11

Summary

Just as the two of them had gotten comfortable with their relationship, Nate – unsurprisingly—starts to withdraw from Hannah, seeing “her in an unfamiliar light—vulnerable, needy” so that his “guilt flickered into annoyance” (138). Once again, we spend time in Nate’s interior monologue as his mood changes from satisfaction to irritation.

Nate feels a bit cheered up when they watch an indie film in bed, but the feeling subsides and he find himself feeling that dullness once again. This despite how strongly his book was being received. What he experiences the narrator calls “free floating ennui” (140). Before the book deal, he had gotten so used to the state of uncertainty financially and professionally, that part of him missed that sense of urgency.

When he goes for a run at the park, Nate remembers the nonprofit that maintained the park soliciting him, and how guilty he felt for tossing the letter in the trash. What had he become, he asked himself. He used to believe that by choosing to freelance and live a sparse life materially, that he rejected conformity and enslavement to middle class convention. But here he was in the same place as everyone else: “Was this—latte liberalism—his inescapable fate? Surely it was. It was sheer vanity to pretend otherwise. What’d he think he was going to do, foment revolution with his precious essay about the commodification of conscience?” (141). In other words, he would make up for his now upper-middle class privilege by writing against the very way of life he now lived. He found that “he could never send in his hundred dollars to this or that charitable organization without feeling like he’d crossed over and that something had been lost along the way” (141).

Nate takes great pleasure in finding the pulse of his novel. He would do it again for free, staying up those late nights painstakingly creating the world in his mind and its characters for “feverishly distilling into words thoughts not his own,” but that of his characters “had been ecstasies of absorption and self-forgetfulness” (142). He found his true sense of self in his writing. The problem was that of “course, life couldn’t always be lived at that pitch” (142). There was the banal, day to day that needed to be lived.

Wanting Hannah and Aurit to get to know each other well, he sets up dinner with Aurit at a restaurant. But then they end up liking each other too much so that he feels overtaken by chatty women. On the way home, Hannah asks if he was alright, noticing his quietness. He takes the opportunity to criticize Aurit’s domination of the conversation and her typical holier-than-thou attitude. Hannah gives oral sex to Nate, and he starts thinking about other things so that their sexual encounter does not work. She becomes highly self-conscious, asking him if she could do something differently. Nate is not good at sex talk of this sort and refuses to give instruction. So instead of saying he is dissatisfied, he tells her she is doing great. Afterward, Nate decides he does not like



Hannah's bedroom, what he described as "fusty" and messy"(149). Also, it "almost too neatly embodied so much that was unattractive about women: mustiness, materialism, clutter" (149). He does not tell Hannah his thoughts, that what she just did was unsexy. Instead, he tells her that she smells good.

Analysis

It comes as no real surprise when we see Nate start to withdraw from Hannah, as soon as things get comfortable. The previous chapter built up toward this inevitability. Therefore, one can argue that the novel is becoming predictable.

Chapter 11 follows the same course as most of the novel, drawing the reader into Nate's thoughts as he moves about in his relationship with Hannah, as well as with others that are important to him, such as Aurit, reminding us that one of the primary points of the novel is to represent a type, a character who sounds familiar to this generation, self-indulgent yet obsessed with the social issues he himself is immersed in. The novel is not only a case study of an individual, but of a specific generation, what is called the Millennial Generation.

The most poignant and telling portion of Chapter 11 occurs when the narrator describes the existential crisis Nate experiences. This sensation of dissatisfaction is all too familiar to the modern reader, the feeling of dissatisfaction that comes from the day-to-day grind. Nate, like many of us, has trouble accepting this as the human condition, the inevitability that life cannot be lived on a constant high or energetic level. Sadly, he allows his boredom with novelty seep into his relationship with Hannah, even though it is going well.

Discussion Question 1

Is the novel becoming too predictable at this point (Chapter 11)? Or are you still engaged with the narrative? Explain.

Discussion Question 2

What do you think is causing Nate to see Hannah in a different light in Chapter 11?

Discussion Question 3

Is Nate possibly bipolar because of his seemingly constantly changing moods? What else might explain his vacillation in feelings toward Hannah?

Vocabulary

diminution, ennui, foliage, solicitation, unencumbered, vapid, salacious, cloying, sprawling, periphery, insipid, gamely, quibbled, recalibration, lecherous, modicum, amiability, beatific, wafted, fusty, brigade



Chapter 12

Summary

In Chapter 12, Nate and Hannah have their first argument. Hannah senses that things have become different between them. She asks Nate if he wants to go to brunch with her friend Susan who is visiting from Chicago. Based on what Hannah told him about Susan, he does not feel the desire to meet someone who saw herself as a constant victim of a range of jerky men. He also very much dislikes the idea of brunch. When Nate hangs around as if waiting to see if Hannah would get upset, she lashes out at him. She cannot stand him waiting for her to get mad at him for declining the brunch. She feels like Nate is testing her, putting her into a box. She resents him for making her out to be this person she is not. Nate insists he has no idea what she is talking about and Hannah then swears at him. This episode unnerves Nate, leaving him shaky and on edge. He wonders why Hannah became so demanding and hysterical; after all, he had not done anything. Hannah then apologizes for blowing up. Ironically, Nate almost wishes she would keep acting crazy because "it was not always unpleasant to deal with a hysterical woman. One feels so thoroughly righteous in comparison" (157). He has even gotten aroused in the heat of their argument.

In a fair and reasonable tone, Hannah rehashes what happened, articulating the reasons she thinks she reacted the way she did: "I think I reacted the way I did because I felt like you were waiting for me to burst into tears about brunch with Susan. It just seemed narcissistic or something. I don't know, it just pissed me off" (157). She went on saying that she sensed something was different. She does not expect things to be exactly how they were when they first started dating, but she does want him to tell her if something is up. She ends her side of the argument on this note: "If you don't want this, fine. I'm not some girl who is dying to be in a relationship" (158). Rather than taking her words for what they are worth, Nate absorbs them into his sarcastic worldview, that "[p]retty much every relationship conversation he had ever been party to included more or less the same caveats" (158), which includes the claim that no woman of the age is the kind that "(a) wants a boyfriend or (b) wants to talk about her relationship, no matter how much she (a) wants a boyfriend and (b) wants to talk about her relationship" (158).

Hannah reads between the lines; she takes Nate's excuses not to see her, his skulking around guiltily, not wanting to have brunch as a sign that he is not happy. Nate in turn insists that he means nothing by it, he just does not want to disappoint her. When she says she thinks he might be unhappy on some level, he cuts her off to say he wants to be with her, he simply do not want to have brunch with her friend. Then he mentions the stress he feels over not getting started on another book. Just when he thinks the issue is resolved and they keep talking, this only proves his conviction that "women, once they got started, exhibited a rather insatiable desire to confess, elaborate, iron out, reveal, and so on and so forth" (159).



Analysis

Nate apparently thrives on confrontation and struggle. When in the heat of their argument, Hannah acting hysterical, he becomes aroused, and feels some shame over it. He simultaneously abhors such emotional hysterical behavior and becomes aroused by it.

For better or worse, Chapter 12 appears to feed the cliché about the differences between men and women, particularly in navigating through a romantic relationship. The chapter harps on the trope of the man being the more reasonable one and the woman the emotional and hysterical, wanting to talk everything out and basing their actions on emotions; however, one can point to this portrayal as being merely Nate's view of matters and not the view of the novel itself, matters which are obviously biased and tainted by generalizations. After all, Hannah does not continue acting on emotion, but rather becomes reasonable and fair as she proceeds to evaluate their argument.

When Hannah defensively states that she is not dying to be in a relationship, and Nate assumes she is behaving like every other woman who claims she does not want a boyfriend or to talk about her relationship, he refuses to place any of the blame on himself but, rather, depends on the stereotype of women as illogical. So while the scene plays out according to type, the one making the generalizations and promoting clichés is Nate, not necessarily the narrative itself.

Discussion Question 1

Would you identify Chapter 12 as parody? If so, how does it fit this category? If not, why does it use clichés?

Discussion Question 2

Is Hannah acting unreasonable when she accuses Nate of hiding something about how he feels? Is she overreacting?

Discussion Question 3

Does Hannah have reason to think there is something wrong? Is there more to this argument than just Nate not wanting to have brunch with her difficult friend?

Vocabulary

chortled, solicitude, pettishly, squelched, inflected, pantomime, vanquished, caveats



Chapter 13

Summary

Chapter 13 consists of three parts. In the first part, Nate carries on a phone conversation with both of his parents. Though critical of the idea that Nate had an agent, which he does not think is necessary, Nate's father is nonetheless the easier of the two to get along with. On the other hand, Nate's mother, a Romanian immigrant, carries an 'us against the world' mentality. Nate always admired her exotic beauty and intelligent appreciation of literature and culture, but what troubles him is her smugness and persecution complex. He notes that their "adult relationship was built on his willingness to humor her" (164). He did sympathize with her complaints, for in "Romania, she'd been denied all sorts of academic honors because she was Jewish" (164). In the states, she worked as a computer programmer to put him through private school and a good college.

In the second section of Chapter 13, Nate and Hannah go to a sports bar, and while there, critical thoughts come to mind. He wonders if this is what his life had come to, sitting with her at various bars and restaurants, committed to being into their relationship. He even "noticed that the skin underneath jiggled a little bit, like a much older woman's" (167), surprised since she was very fit. Yet he "felt bad for noticing and worse for being a little repelled. And yet he was transfixed. The distaste he felt, in its crystalline purity, was perversely pleasurable" (167). Rather than focusing on the topics of conversation, "Nate began to feel as if he were watching her from a remove, evaluating her...something in her tone, an eagerness to please, a quality that was almost pleading, grated on him" (167). When she asked if everything was okay, he snaps back that he is fine. When she then asks if he is mad at her, he goes on a mental rant: "Why the fuck did women, no matter how smart, how independent, inevitably revert to this state of willed imbecility?" (168). When she says she does not want to be treated this way, Nate's internal monologue became even more offensive, thinking to himself that "maybe she should do some tricep curls so her upper arms didn't jiggle" or buy "some jeans that had been vetted from all angles" (169). He realizes that he "sounded, even to himself, like some sick fetishist of female emaciation. He sounded like a real bastard" (169).

In the final part of Chapter 13, Nate visits his friend Andrew's new apartment along with Aurit and Jason. In the packed living room, Nate spots Greer looking good in her tight jeans. He has a good time, especially since he has a girlfriend and does not have to worry about hitting on girls or getting into boring conversations with them just so he can get laid. He had thought about inviting Hannah, but not knowing really why, he did not go through with it. When he gets home after the party, he and Hannah have sex, and he notices something briefly, which was "total vacancy, absence, as if she were a log floating down a river, as if she were scarcely conscious that he was fucking her" (173). Feeling offended, Nate decides that if "she wasn't having the best sex of her life, he couldn't help but feel it wasn't all his fault" (173). He then turns their sex rough, noting



again her loose flesh. No longer irritated, Nate notices Hannah get out of bed to the living room, and later when she comes back and he asks if everything is okay, she says it is fine. Still, he notices "something aggrieved in her voice, an unstated recrimination that, even in his half-asleep state, awakened a sense of dread" (174).

Analysis

The first section of Chapter 13 takes the tact of characterizing Nate's parents within scene rather than through Nate's internal monologue. Yet, they are still portrayed through his lens. For example, Nate is critical of his mother's smugness and sense of persecution, but he does not notice that he is a lot like his mother; he shares some of what he considers negative traits. Nate does have an empathetic side, as he realizes why his mother is the way she is--so much had been closed off to her in her youth because of being a Jewish woman.

The second part of the chapter serves as a map of Nate's changing feelings for Hannah, his tendency to start looking for faults in her appearance and demeanor. He is especially cruel in his thoughts about her jigging skin. Now that the novelty of their relationship has worn off, he is questioning why he is with her. We are again reminded of the oft-appearing trope of the gun-shy, non-committal guy. His misogynist views pop up again when he labels all women as imbeciles in relationship issues even though they may be intellectually smart. He gets bored when things are going too well or too smoothly, constantly needing a challenge, for when he struggles to get back into her good humor, having a project to do, he no longer feels bored. Yet, in all this, he does recognize that he is being quite unfair and apologizes.

Nate's spotting Greer Cohen foreshadows her return into the picture. Although we are only given that glance, we can feel something significant coming as Nate also hesitated inviting Hannah to accompany him to the new apartment party. Though he does call her afterward to ask if she wants to come over, he does so more out of guilt than desire. The glimpse of vacancy in her eyes while they have sex also foreshadows ill in their declining relationship. They both say to each other that everything is fine, when prompted, but both they and we know that this is not the case at all.

Discussion Question 1

vociferous, smugness, invocation, cloistered, condescension, tepid, tenement, fraught, vehemence, capitulation, imbecility, vilifying, protracted, tentative, acquiescent, aggrieved, recrimination

Discussion Question 2

Who is Nate like -- his father or mother? Support your answer with examples from the chapters.



Discussion Question 3

Why is a good portion of Chapter 13 spent on the conversation Nate has with his parents? What role do they play in the plot of the novel?

Vocabulary

Is it Hannah herself that Nate is becoming dissatisfied or something else? Explain.



Chapter 14

Summary

In this chapter, Nate heartbreakingly realizes he loved Hannah, but simultaneously that he is to blame for the continuing decline of their relationship. She admits that she slept around in high school, which prompts Nate to envision "those empty-headed, teenage douche bags fucking Hannah, passing her around from one to the next, of her obliging them because she was nice," and these images surprisingly "turned him on like porn turned him on" (175-176). In turn, they have what he considers the hottest sex in a long time. The next morning, cheerful, Hannah offers to make eggs and Nate snaps back that he does not want any. Of course, his attitude leads to Hannah taking offense and feeling hurt. While she leaves to get bagels for breakfast, he looks at the books stacked by her bedside table and they exude the theme of the lovelorn woman. In thinking this, he suspects that he might be paranoid.

Nate meets with Elisa, who wants advice about an upcoming job interview. The way she looks at him reminds Nate of those times she went down on him, and he finds himself shifting in his seat from sexual desire. When she asks how things are going with Hannah, he admits things are not great of late. While talking, Nate plays out various scenes of having sex with Elisa. The next night, Hannah asks if he had fun with Elisa, and when he says yes, she coldly responds she is glad they did. They meet some of her friends from journalism school, whom Nate finds interesting. But Hannah gets drunk and starts an argument when they get home. She says that being a nice person like her friends is the most important thing, and continues on to say, "'You know that the other stuff is all vanity, right? Writing, I mean'" (179). She then takes a jab at Nate's style, his "'artfully crafted sentences," which, she says, only mimic true feelings. Nate does not really take offense, recognizing she is lashing out at him. His criticism of her writing is that "she wasn't ambitious enough" (180) and always reacting defensively of any criticism of her writing. Yet, he tells her, she deserves more recognition than she has received, as he thinks she is extremely talented. This leads Hannah to feel frustrated that just when she wanted to paint him as a total jerk, he goes and says something nice like that. At that moment, Nate wonders if he should break up with her.

When Peter comes to town, Nate and Hannah join him and Jason and Peter wins Hannah over. When she and Nate return to her place afterward, she cries. She then reveals that the reason for her tears is that Nate seems so concerned that his friends like her, which they do. In other words, she recognizes that his friends' opinions matter just a little too much to him. This revelation leads to her asking what went wrong between she and Nate. Then Nate experiences a revelation of his own, that "it was him. Whatever had happened, it was him" (185). His irritation having faded, he walks toward her with tender feelings and admits, "'I think, maybe, I'm just not very good at relationships'" (185). When she responds that maybe they should admit the whole thing is not working, she admits she does really like him, that there is something about him that makes her stay; only, what they have become is sapping something out of her. Nate



becomes awash with sadness, wondering "whether he was flawed on some deep level, whether...there was something terribly wrong with him" (185). Yet, from "the beginning, he had felt at home with her" (186). He tells her he is sorry and he thinks they ought to keep trying. This is when he realizes that of course he did love her, "Had he merely been punishing her for some unknown crime? For being nice to him?" (186). At the end of Chapter 14, he "buried his face in her hair, mumbling something about love" (187).

Analysis

The focus of this chapter appears to be Nate's pubescent/adolescent type of behavior in reaction to Hannah and Elisa on the sexual level. When Nate alternately despises the idea of other guys having sex with Hannah and becomes aroused by it, having the best sex they have ever had because of it. Nate gets a kick out of this different version of Hannah is not surprising, considering his misogynistic tendencies. He reacts similarly to Elisa when they meet to talk about her upcoming interview, making Elisa the object of his fantasies.

A complicating factor in Nate and Hannah's relationship is that they are both writers with differing styles, which creates a jealous tension; Hannah is sensitive to criticism though Nate plays it like he is not. He does seem sincere when he says she is extremely talented and that she ought to get more recognition as such a writer.

More foreshadowing comes our way in Chapter 14 when right after Hannah says it is hard to paint Nate as a total jerk when he says sweet things intermittently he spots on "the ceiling, dark shadows...indistinguishable from dust. Nate wondered for a moment if he should break up with her. But he liked her" (180). Though he cannot see it, the reader wonders at his doubts and hesitance; what has Hannah really done or what is it about her that is moving him towards dissolving the relationship? She naturally reacted jealously when she found out he spent hours with Elisa, until midnight, but what girl would not have?

Up to this point in the novel, Hannah has become a rather complex character as opposed to flat. Though technically she is secondary to Nate, without her rich character the heart of the novel would be lacking. While the narrator portrays her as sympathetic, at points one wonders whether or not she is being unreasonable, such as when while intoxicated she takes offense to Nate acting especially affectionate around his friends, and interpreting his behavior around Peter and Jason as being proof that he needs their approval. Yet one can see her as highly perceptive, for the real reason she acts with contempt is that she senses something has gone wrong in their relationship.

When Nate admits that he is probably all to blame, this compels the reader to wonder if he is knowingly sabotaging their relationship, albeit subtly. Or does Hannah share some of the blame? The scenes compel one to ask these questions without providing a clear-cut answer. One cannot help but feel some pity for Nate when he wonders if something is terribly wrong with him at the core: "Did romance reveal some truth, a fundamental lack, a coldness, that made him shrink back at just the moment when reciprocity was



called for?" (186). It is also sad and touching when he realizes he is at home with Hannah, knowing that their relationship seems doomed.

Discussion Question 1

Now that it is nearing the end of the novel, do you get the sense that Nate is fundamentally flawed? Do you agree with him that he is fully to blame for the downfall of his relationship with Hannah? Explain.

Discussion Question 2

What is it that troubles Hannah about Nate's behavior, specifically with Jason and Peter around?

Discussion Question 3

Are Nate's fantasies harmless or do they demonstrate something really wrong with his sensibilities? Explain.

Vocabulary

cloying, overweening, treacly, gauzy, churlishness, surly, callow



Chapter 15

Summary

Chapter 15 turns out to be the 'break-up' chapter; as recent chapters had predicted, Greer in Nate's line of vision, who "had become a recurring figure in his fantasy life" (188), returns evermore flirtatious and suggesting they should have a drink sometime to talk about writing. He reconsiders his opinion of her, which transforms into one more generous, that she is warm and friendly and that though her writing is not his sort of thing, she has a better book deal than he does and so should be praised for it.

Seeing Greer again and now having her card reminds Nate of how he had cheated on Kristen once before and how he feared that once he cheated there would be no return to decency. He had been enticed by the chance at variety.

After the night he and Hannah had almost broke up, Nate worried that Hannah was now watching him too closely, looking for further signs of discontent. Yet, he does not try to be more careful about his actions; in fact, when they go out for dinner, Hannah catches him checking out an attractive woman. This sparks yet another argument, where Hannah finally says she cannot not do this anymore. Nate becomes defensive in his mind, thinking that it is not a big deal to check out an attractive woman. But Hannah insists that it went beyond just looking at another woman briefly; he did it spitefully. From Nate's perspective, their relationship has become this "dinky little rinse-and-repeat melodrama" (198). In his opinion, relationships shouldn't be that difficult and he no longer wants this either. Greer pops up in his mind again as a sort of refuge; she had given him her card with her number and this had to mean something. Hannah believes that Nate does not feel the need to invest all that much into their relationship since he has his book, the most important thing to him. This leads Nate to wonder if he ought to tell her that maybe she should care more about her book project, and that she lacks enough motivation. He decides against not saying this. He tries to explain what he thinks happened: "Sometimes I think I've lost something...Some capacity to be with another person, something I used to have...I feel pretty fucked, to tell the truth" (202). She remarks that he is "the guy who is all interested in a woman until the very moment when it dawns on him that he has her. Wanting only what you can't have. The affliction of shallow morons everywhere" (202).

Though the narrator does not say so directly, we can assume this is truly the end of their relationship. When Nate returns home to his own apartment, he reflects on that night as one he would regret but yet he feels glad to be free of the heavy yoke their relationship has become. He thinks to himself how he is sure it is all his fault, all of it.



Analysis

The foreshadowing one had picked up on in previous chapters turned out to be accurate in this chapter. Greer appears to have returned for good, for Nate has saved her card with her number on it, tempted to cheat as he once did. When things become nearly unbearable for him with Hannah, he turns to his fantasy almost come true with Greer, who does not hide her interest in Nate. One can surmise that Nate's character is almost masochistic, in the sense that he knows Hannah is watching him yet he sabotages their relationship by outright checking another woman out in front of her.

When Nate says he is all to blame, one senses disingenuousness, as if admitting this will bring him sympathy or even pity, rather than trying to make things right. Hannah is not one to be easily deceived; though Nate would not readily admit it, he did not completely do his part to make the relationship work.

The theme of solitude vs. commune with another human being rears its head in Chapter 15, evident in Hannah's perception that Nate has his book deal to turn to for solace when the road gets bumpy. Can one invest fully in both individual and relationship endeavors? This appears to be an unresolved problem inherent in an artist or writer's life.

Discussion Question 1

What do you think of Nate blaming himself exclusively for the downfall of his relationship with Hannah? Is he being sincere or disingenuous? Use the text to support your view.

Discussion Question 2

Is it possible that Hannah is finding reasons to break up? Is she culpable in any manner? Explain.

Discussion Question 3

By the way Chapter 15 portrays Nate's wandering tendencies, what do you think is the novel's overall opinion of Nate's behavior as a male in his 30's?

Vocabulary

cachet, desultory, meretricious, wan, abject, lurched, furrowed, prismatic, stodgy, winced, accoutrements, incredulous, chortling, ruefully



Chapter 16

Summary

The day after they break up, the main emotion Nate feels is guilt. But this is not a surprise, since Nate has “had a long and intimate relationship with guilt” (204) over everything from his privileged status as a white middle class man to the break up with Hannah. He feels guilty for looking at that other woman and just the way he behaved in general. The epiphany he has at this point reaches a new height: “Only now had it seemed to him that he’d been in some kind of fugue state the whole time, going back and forth from one mood to the other, without ever stopping to consider what was driving the insane back-and-forth.

He reaches deep insight in that “now he wondered if he had, at some point, stacked the deck against her—decided he didn’t want her and then set things up so she’d justify his slackening interest” (206). Part of his shifting moods had included feeling he was being harassed by Hannah; yet, “the truth was he hadn’t stopped liking her” (206), which baffles him. He even resents her for being too meek, willing to allow him to treat her badly. When he thinks perhaps she loved him, it makes him wince because “come on, was he ever going to find someone with no annoying tics or physical imperfections? What real criticism did he have of her?” (207).

In frustration, Nate calls Kristen. When he tells her what happened with Hannah and that he had felt suffocated in the relationship. Kristen eggs him on by saying it sounds like he was justified, that Hannah must have been awful for him to feel that way. Nate then feels defensive on Hannah’s behalf, and without saying so to Kristen, suspects that there is nothing really wrong with Hannah, but that she just did not do it for him anymore, is not enough. Normally, women would grate on his nerves about the same time he lost interest sexually; however the problem “with Hannah, he now felt, was the drop-off in his attraction, in his excitement about her, had not corresponded to his feelings about her as a person. It had showed him up, to himself” (208). He further tells Kristen he thinks he had been a jerk, and Kristen emphatically tells him that he should go easy on himself. Apparently, Kristen “didn’t have much sympathy for the romantic travails of women. Although she was good, so very good, the sphere of her sympathy was a bit circumscribed” (209). After speaking with Kristen, Nate opens the fridge at home and finds a bunch of celery Hannah had given him, to snack on with peanut butter. What he feels then is not guilt, but something else.

Not surprisingly, Nate turns to his friend Jason next, who tells Nate that even though he liked Hannah, they did not seem right together, that she was mousy and seemed overly nervous around Nate. Again, Nate feels defensive. He cannot turn to Aurit because she is in Germany. Jason makes his case for the differences between men and women in the stereotypical fashion: that men as a rule “men want a reason to end a relationship, while women want a reason to keep it going” (213). Aurit would have said that “men and women both need relationships just as badly; men just don’t know it” (214).



The chapter ends with Nate running into Amay Perelman from high school who has gotten engaged. He no longer feels the admiration and desire he used to feel. In fact, she is no longer desirable to him. He finds an email from Hannah, a long one, which in effect tells Nate he is a jerk. She does not hold back her feelings in the message, expresses how angry she is that he seemed to be playing some kind of game, persuading her to stay but then behaving as if he did not want their relationship anymore. She wonders if she did something wrong. But she ends by saying she had hesitated sending the email but did not want to back down from fear; she wants to be honest. The letter does not make Nate want to get back together with her. He rationalizes that they both had given the relationship plenty of changes and reading her email “brought back all the feelings of guilt and dread and discomfort he’d come to associate with her” (220). He had to move forward. He almost sends her a message back, but decides against it, to wait and make a decision later. A week after that email, he spends what turns out to be a good night with Greer. Then he finds one more email from Hannah, angry that he did not respond. She says: “You’re a bigger asshole than I ever imagined. I can’t believe you couldn’t even bother to respond. Anyway, there’s just one other thing I wanted to tell you. You’re really bad in bed” (222).

Analysis

Since most of the narrative in Chapter 16 and throughout the whole novel is from Nate’s perspective, it is telling us that the novel values a person’s consciousness as a means to understanding their behavior and the course of action they choose to take. The human psyche is of value and the search for understanding what makes it tick. The tragedy is that even when Nate has the epiphany a day after he and Hannah break up that he had “been in some kind of fugue state the whole time” he never really does reach a full epiphany, or explanation for why he cannot seem to do his part to make a relationship work. He gets very close to self-understanding, but then he does not follow through conclusively. He falls back into rationalizing away the real reasons or possible reasons why he backed out, going from guilt to anger.

Considering that Chapter 16 spends a good amount of time in the first part pontificating on Nate’s innate sense of guilt, it indicates that this extreme sense of guilt may be a part of the problem in his relationships. He seems to almost thrive on this feeling. He asks himself, what had he done to deserve an easier life than others who suffered in the lower classes. Perhaps this feeling of not being deserving seeps into his relationships with women, where deep down, he does not feel deserving of being with a truly good, earnest woman.

Hannah’s assessment that Nate has to have his friends’ approval turns out to be true. He calls his ex, the one of only two serious relationships he has had, for comfort. Perhaps she tells him what he wants to hear, that he is not a bad person, but ironically, when she does take his side, he feels defensive on Hannah’s behalf. Then when he turns to Jason, of course he could not have been ignorant of what stance Jason would take, which he did in stereotyping men versus women; however, Jason is not as harsh on Hannah as he expected. Jason does say that he did not think they were right for



each other, but ironically again, this does not make Nate feel any better. He is trying to find further reason to feel guilty in a masochist kind of way, and no matter what his friends say, they cannot seem to apply salve to his wounds.

The wording of Hannah's email to Nate may come as a surprise to some readers, in contrast to her eloquence in face-to-face relations. It sinks into somewhat childish accusations, especially the second email where she tells Nate he is bad in bed. The author's choice in this case may be for the purpose of questioning Hannah's part in the devolving of their relationship. It is up to the reader to decide how culpable she is or if she is justified in such immature behavior.

Discussion Question 1

What do you think Nate really wanted from turning to his friends for comfort?

Discussion Question 2

Up to this point, how would you describe Nate's psyche? Is there something really wrong with him in terms of his ability (or inability) to make a success of his romantic relationships?

Discussion Question 3

Is Hannah's message justified? Would you agree that she exposed immature behavior? Explain.

Vocabulary

jowls, squalid, extricate, magnanimity, stentorian, flailing, garbled, sprawled, confluence, gregarious, acolyte, voluminousness



Chapter 17

Summary

Nate's love affairs lead him to a sense of resignation rather than to closure. Without planning to, he ends up staying with Greer beyond the amount of time he had been with Hannah; after dating for a little over a year, they move in together. With Greer, Nate feels free to live two lives: "He retained a separate sense of self, which was untouched, free, no matter how obliged his physical person was to, say, come to Greer's aid when she got scared" (233). Though he thought of Hannah from time to time with regret, he does not miss the feeling that the whole of him was what she desired and expected.

Unsurprisingly, Aurit is the last of Nate's friends to appear on the scene, returning from a trip to Israel and Germany. When she finds out that Nate is now dating Greer, she cannot not hide the disappointment in her voice. She had heard from Hannah, who had nothing bad to say about Nate, who on the other hand defends himself saying that the only thing he did wrong was not respond to Hannah's email. In literary terms, Aurit says, "Don't be an unreliable narrator. What'd you do to piss her off?" (224). Nate feels bad when he thinks of Hannah and how it all turned out and predicts that what he has going with Greer will probably just be short-term.

Filling in the gaps, the narrator reveals that Nate and Greer slept together on their first date. What surprised Nate was that Greer cried right after. He was fascinated by her ability to move from self-confidence to a naïf. Greer's ideas are her own but never go beyond pop culture and a particular "strand of women's literature" (226). She is not intense but lighthearted for the most part and uses tears to get her way. He sees her as "about the sexiest, most touching thing he'd ever seen. Sweet and tough and sad and hot all at once" (227). She is not impressed with Nate's literary fame, considering his intellectual prowess as boring, while he sees her work as puerile and self-indulgent. These negative attitudes toward each other's work bubbles over in their fights, which happens more often the more serious their relationship grows.

Nate's book finally comes out in the month of February. He feels closer to Greer at this time, grateful for them being together through all of this. Nate never really feels bored with Greer for "there was always some distraction, a crisis, or a fight or some fantastic scheme of hers" (230). On the whole, his friends do not like her the way they liked Hannah. Nate feels he has found the right person in Greer.

Nate sees Hannah one more time at Cara's birthday party. She has sold her book proposal and is dating a filmmaker. He feels like apologizing for everything but is afraid it will all come out wrong. Finally, he congratulates her on her book, and she blushes. Just then he asks himself if he had told her he loved her the night she met Peter. He indeed did love her. These thoughts make him feel lightheaded. The last thing she says to him is to say hello to Peter for her. On the way home, Nate's memories return with a vengeance, that painful sense of loss. He realizes that of course Hannah seemed more



appealing than ever, now that she was out of reach. Sadly, even “now, it was hard for him to say why he’d been unhappy with Hannah” (239). His epiphany (anti-epiphany?) is that the sense of loss will eventually fade like all other moods. He had his book and Greer. Whether or not he deserved it, he was happy. The only evidence left of that last night together would be the unsent email in his drafts folder. He would no more remember any of this than he would remember “the exact scent of air from his bedroom at dawn, after he’d been up all night working” (240).

Analysis

The Love Affairs of Nathaniel P. comes to a bittersweet end, where Nate has an epiphany of sorts, that he could not give a real solid reason for why he had felt unhappy with Hannah. One could argue that he has an anti-epiphany in that he never does come to a solid answer; he also realizes that all this would pass as it would have to, now that he had moved on to a new life with a new woman.

The novel’s last lines indicate irony. The last statement is that Nate would “no more remember the pain—or the pleasure—of this moment than he would remember, once he moved into the new apartment, the exact scent of the air from his bedroom window at dawn, after he’d been up all night working” (240). If the reader recalls, that was one of Nate’s favorite things, the scent from his window after working hard on his writing; therefore, the real meaning behind these words is the opposite of what it is literally saying. He will in fact remember how he felt that last night with Hannah because it was so painful and life-changing for him.

Nate seems to be as happy as he can be, in the end of the matter, because he can retain his sense of self when he is with Greer, not like he felt when with Hannah. Though Hannah was a good girlfriend and person, she ended up, consciously or not, suffocating him with her anxiety over their relationship. This seems to be the attitude of the narrator toward Nate and his faults. He is not completely to blame for why things did not work out. Hannah had her faults too.

While Nate had always been concerned about what his friends thought of whom he was dating, he seems to have matured in this sense with Greer. They do not like Greer as they did Hannah, yet he does not allow this to change his mind about Greer. In this sense, he has come to be resigned that no relationship will ever be perfect and that he cannot (or will not) change his ways just to please the other person in the relationship. He still does not have the answers as to why he was unhappy with someone who seemed the perfect match, or why so many of his past relationships failed. That is the point of the novel, that one can never really know why some relationships work and others do not. Regret is not enough for closure or to make amends.



Discussion Question 1

Does Nathaniel P. have a true epiphany, according to the conventional motif of stories with concluding epiphanies? If so, what is his epiphany? Could you argue for an anti-epiphany? If so, how?

Discussion Question 2

What is the narrator's tone when it comes to Greer? Is she merely a dumb blond or high maintenance naïf?

Discussion Question 3

Why do you think Nate felt unhappy with Hannah toward the end of their relationship? Could she have done things differently, in a way that would make Nate want to stay?

Vocabulary

puerile, frisson, purged, exogenous, rapacious, histrionic, imperiously, astute, interstices



Characters

Nathaniel Piven

Nathaniel Piven, otherwise known as Nate is the main protagonist of *The Love Affairs of Nathaniel P.* His character is the main focus of this psychological study of a novel, wherein his internal thoughts, actions, and behavior, primarily with women, are examined.

Nate's parents are Jewish immigrants from Romania who moved to America to improve their life and provide Nate with a college education. In his thirties, Nate is a rising star in the Brooklyn literary scene, born in the 80's and got a college education in the 90's. After a mostly provincial upbringing in the suburbs and going to Harvard, and a slew of low-paying freelance writing jobs, Nate finally achieves literary success with a book deal that makes him very appealing to single New York women.

Nate's thought process is the primary focus of the novel as he struggles to juggle his growing literary success and the attention he receives from women, trying to work out a legacy of failed relationships. When he meets Hannah, a woman worthy of his interest, he tries to make the relationship work, but ends up yet again failing at making the relationship last.

Hannah

Hannah, whose last name is not mentioned in the novel, is Nate's primary love interest in *The Love Affairs of Nathaniel P.* She is introduced at Elisa's dinner party as "a thin, pert-breasted wrier, pleasant-looking in spite of rather angular features...almost universally regarded as nice and smart, or smart and nice" (7). She becomes much more rounded-out as the novel progresses, one worthy of Nate's interest because she is smart, intellectual, and down-to-earth.

Her parents had grown up on the west side of Cleveland, her father the "brainy son of an autoworker who'd wooed and won a popular girl, Hannah's mother, when they were students at Kent State" (66). Hannah is not as successful of a writer as Nate. She is a freelance writer and working on a book contract when she meets Nate.

While claiming to not be as invested in pursuing a writing career as Nate, Hannah is drawn to Nate for his intellectual and literary tastes as well as his success as a writer. She is highly perceptive, recognizing Nate's growing distance. She alternately castigates him and pleads with him to try to make the relationship work, being both needy and distant at the same time.



Jason

One of Nate's closest friends, Jason is described by Nate as a curly headed guy with "the aspect of a diabolical cherub" (10). In the three-way-friendship of Nate, Jason, and Peter, Jason is the cheerful one who served to leaven the dynamic of the trio.

Jason a writer of nonfiction articles and a magazine editor, his most current essay project being about obesity and called "Don't Let Them Eat Cake." He holds mostly shallow views of women, stereotyping their roles in relationships as emotional and needy, preferring the model-type women romantically. Nate is simultaneously repelled and intrigued by Jason's savvy, his ability to come across as an everyman with deep thoughts about the big issues; however, Jason has a strange trait of being "prissy, almost squeamish when it came to physical contact" (42). Nate lays great weight on Jason's opinions, particularly of the women Nate chooses to date, such as Hannah.

Aurit

Aurit's character works as a kind of secondary conscience for Nate, who is her close friend and with whom she is honest. Nate and Aurit never got romantically involved because he was not attracted to her in that sense. They have a complicated friendship for the fact that she is highly opinionated, especially about relationships. She does not hold back in criticizing Nate's behavior.

Peter

Nate met Peter through Jason, and together they create a trio. Peter is the one Nate feels closest to because he is similarly bashful and most good-natured. When Hannah asks what Peter is like, Nate describes him as smart and lonely and really wanting a girlfriend. But some viewed him as pretentious because of his affected courtliness. Out of all Nate's friends, Hannah likes Peter the most.

Kristen

Kristen is one of only two women that Nate has a serious relationship. They meet in his junior of college. Kristen is sunny in good looks, bighearted and socially active; however, the main reason the young Nate breaks up with her is because she does not share his love for literature.

Nate's parents

Nate's parents are immigrants from Romania. His father is an aeronautical engineer and his mother a computer programmer. Nate's relationship with his mother is more complicated than with his father, whom he simply did not argue with. His mother,



however, suffered from unfair treatment as a Jewish woman back home, partly explaining her difficult personality.

Greer Cohen

Greer got an advance of \$400,000 for her book on adolescent sex shenanigans, and so she is successful but not much respected. She is flirty and friendly, tomboyish in style of dress, but tartish. She ends up with Nate for the long-term by the end of the novel.

Elisa

Elisa is Nate's most recent ex, with whom Nate had a serious relationship. She works for a Very Important Publisher but disappoints Nate in that she does not hold opinions of her own; she seeks acceptance from the dominant male figures in her life, such as her father and editor/employer. She hits on Nate at her dinner party, even though they are broken up, and Nate stays friends with her because he feels sorry for her. She does not treat Nate very well; she is high maintenance and demanding.

Eugene Wu

Eugene is only one of Nate's acquaintances but whom Nate feels envious of when he gets a gig to write a review that Nate really wanted. Eugene is described as a highly suspicious person, apt to taking things personal.



Symbols and Symbolism

Aurit

Opinionated and domineering, Aurit represents Nate's secondary conscience. She does not hold back from being utterly frank with Nate.

Jason

The character of Jason symbolizes the everyman. In relation to Nate, he also represents the misogynistic male gaze.

Nate's essay

The theme of Nate's essay is the outsourcing of exploitation; it symbolizes the heavy liberal guilt that weighs down on Nate's shoulders.

Nate's novel

Nate's novel represents his anxieties over who he really is, his identity. Nate's novel starts off focusing on a character like himself, the son of immigrant parents. When he changes its focus to the parents rather than the son, his book takes off.

Amy Perelman's hair scrunchy

The scrunchy that Nate keeps belonging to Amy symbolizes the insecure Nate of his early college years.

Hannah

Hannah represents the kind of woman that Nate feels he does not deserve--smart, literary, kind, down-to-earth.

Greer Cohen

Greer symbolizes what Nate settles for; she is someone who allows him to live two lives--one separated from their relationship, and the one in the relationship.



Michelle Goldstein

Since Nate connected with Michelle in high school, when he was innocent, she represents the innocence and wonder of youth.

Juliette

Juliette is proof or representative of Nate's fall into the state of being a jerk to women.

The view from Nate's window

Nate often viewed his neighborhood after many hours of hard work at writing. This view symbolizes his nostalgia for Hannah and for connectedness to his writing.



Settings

Nate's apartment

Nate likes to spend a lot of time at his modest apartment, where he does his writing. He loves the small space, where there is no living room. He lives in his bedroom. The narrator describes his place as similar to "an ungroomed human body, with fetid odors seeping out from dark crevices and unruly patches of overgrowth sprouting up here and there" (41).

Hannah's bedroom

Nate never does like Hannah's bedroom where she kept a "big, freestanding wooden mirror...draped with scarves and belts and other feminine things, from which wafted all sorts of artificial floral vapors" (149). They spend a lot of time together in his bedroom, which eventually causes him to feel depressed.

Prospect Park

Many events in the novel occur at Prospect Park, described as idyllic, and compared to other parks Nate had visited, "didn't feel rickety and abandoned" (115). People went to this park with "wooded hills, rolling meadows, crescent-shaped pond with requisite ducks and swans" (115) to do all sorts of activities such as running, biking, walking, playing little league, etc. He described the park as "a liberal integrationist's wet dream: multiracial, multiethnic, multiclass" (115).

coffee shops

Nate meets with friends at several coffeeshops in his Brooklyn neighborhood, which popped up all over the place as part of gentrification.

Elisa's apartment

It is at Elisa's apartment where Nate meets Hannah and makes conversation about his book, new essay, and liberal guilt. Its brick walls were covered with floral wallpaper, it had irregular beams that made up its wooden floor hidden by carpet. She had several bookcases which reached the ceiling.



Themes and Motifs

Self-Deception vs. Self-Awareness

Through the internal monologue of the main protagonist, Nate, the author shows how a basically good person can be simultaneously self-aware and self-deceiving. The primary way in which the author demonstrates Nate's ability to be self-aware and self-deceiving at the same time is through a close analysis of his thought process. For example, when Nate notices Hannah as a candidate for his romantic attention, he immediately finds fault. In this case, he recognizes that "while she had a nice body" she also had a "loose-limbed quality of a comic actor, goofy and self-conscious, good-humored but perhaps also a bit asexual" (39). He ruminates on how if she had been more conventionally hot, he would probably have paid more attention prior to that night at the dinner party when she had been "the only woman present who was at all a viable candidate for his interest" (39). In a moment of clarity, he realizes that this thought about Hannah must mean something, though he is not absolutely sure what that might mean.

Another example of Nate's self-awareness is in relation to Jason and how much weight he gives to Jason's opinions. He knows very well that Jason is not exactly the right person to consult about romantic matters, that though Jason is good-looking, he "lacked the good-with-women gene" (42). Yet, Nate goes ahead and consults Jason anyhow, hating himself for doing so. What Jason would say or do even arises in Nate's mind at the most appropriate time, such as when micro-analyzing Hannah's physical features.

Occurrences of internal contradictions surface often in the novel. Another example is when Nate and Hannah break up, he realizes that he cannot even describe exactly what was wrong with Hannah or why he had been unhappy with her. But once again, he rationalizes away any true insight that could help him grow as a person by resorting to self-pity or self-resignation, that whatever the reason, it must have been his fault. He decides it is too late for them anyway and settles for Greer. The reality of his self-delusion becomes the big epiphany for Nate toward the end of the novel, but by then it is too late. He has lost Hannah and there is no going back. He resigns himself to the loss and ironically, aware that he has chosen a relationship that is self-destructive in many ways with Greer, he chooses to remain in it.

Motif: Liberal Guilt

From the beginning to the end of the novel, in scene and characterization, the idea of liberal guilt repeats, demonstrating that this is a key issue for the Millennial generation. The issue is introduced in the first chapter at Elisa's dinner party, where Nate reveals to his friends that the point of his new essay is to show "how one of the privileges of being elite is that we outsource the act of exploitation" (9). What he means is that instead of



directly exploiting the under-privileged or lower classes, those of the middle class, including himself, use others to economically exploit, such as hiring immigrants for cheap labor, and then turn around and shop at Whole Foods so as to feel ethically pure.

This instance of Nate feeling liberal guilt is by no means the only time the issue arises. In Chapter 3, when Hannah continues that dinner conversation and questions him further, he gives another example of what he means: “We want comfortable lives, and if we don’t have servants, we have laborsaving devices made in China. Only now we want to feel good about it, too. So we make sure the exploitation happens out of sight” (37). She cannot help but agree that exploitation still occurs under capitalism.

Besides in scene, we get the sense that the idea of systemic exploitation in American society is important to the author through the characterization of Nate. When he attends a free concert in the park, the narrator tells us Nate’s thoughts — why he dislikes these kinds of performances: “He thought there was something grating about upper-middle-class New Yorkers’ love of high culture in city parks. It was so full of self-congratulation, as if a few lousy performances made up for systemic economic inequality” (96). He even feels guilty for only appearing to commiserate with the lower classes in that he lives among them in the neighborhood yet lives a privileged life nonetheless. The author goes to great pains to bring across to the reader that Nate may be a jerk in his behavior with women but he is highly sensitive to the exploitation of the poor and his role in it.

Motif: Dramedy of Manners

Description: The author uses the motif of the dramedy (comedy drama of manners) to magnify the state of romantic relationships between men and women of the millennial generation. The author of *The Love Affairs of Nathaniel P.*, Adelle Waldman, has been called the Jane Austin of our time because of the similarity of her novel to Jane Austin’s comedy of manners. Indeed, Waldman’s novel portrays the manners of a particular demographic, the millennial generation residing in New York as they forge romantic relationships.

Through her main protagonist, Nathaniel P., Waldman portrays the first-world problem of navigating one’s way through life while trying to balance a concern for the larger, wider world with personal needs and desires. The way Nate sees it, the problems he and his friends have with relationships are a first world privileged class concern. He cannot understand why women in particular feel the need to talk out relationship issues and he disagrees with his friend Aurit that romantic relationships are the most important kind of relationship for humans. His feelings about this issue make him all the more determined not to make a relationship the most important endeavor of his life.

One can find moments of humor in the novel in relation to the topic of love relationships, such as in the opening scene on the street when Nate runs into Juliet and caught off guard, he tries to find a way out and she calls him an asshole straightaway, causing him further distress with just the few words, “You could have at least...” (2). Several scenes with Jason are comedic, such as when he teases Nate about Hannah at the wedding



picnic party, and how Nate describes him as handsome but squeamish when it came to contact with the female gender.

Some of the ways that Nate sees things are also comical, such as when he describes Greer's breasts as the perfect size for him, fitting just right into a wine glass, not just any, but a red one. Comedy aside, the drama is most serious when Nate struggles to keep his individuality while in a relationship, which he ironically discovers with Greer. With her, he can salvage an aspect of himself that belongs to him alone, not interfered with by Greer. Somehow and for some reason, he did not feel this way with Hannah; their relationship felt for him, all-consuming.

The struggles of Nate's friends when it comes to relationships are also portrayed, such as Aurit with her German boyfriend who cannot seem to decide whether he wants to continue their long-distance relationship, and Jason also struggling in the dating world. But the microscope is on Nate and the way he deals with what seems to be the best relationship he has ever had, with Hannah.

Solitude vs. Relationships

The novel uses its main protagonist to demonstrate the difficulty of maintaining one's individual identity while in a relationship. Nate might be an jerk with women, but the author resists making this direct judgment herself. While showing Nate's thought process in addition to his interactions with others, she promotes an empathetic reading of Nate's character by showing his concern for others, such as in the guilt he feels for being part of the problem, the elite who outsource exploitation of the disadvantaged.

While Nate is aware that much of the fault lies with himself in the romantic break-ups that he has experienced, he is also self-aware enough to know that he needs to have a sense of a separate self rather than allowing a relationship to consume him. For example, when Aurit argues that romantic relationships are by far the most important kind of human relations, Nate tells her he disagrees, that he is happy with his writing and friends, and all this makes him happy and satisfied. When Hannah insists that something seems wrong and that he is withdrawing, this irritates him to no end. They are not, he insists, joined at the hip.

It is not just with Hannah that Nate struggles to hold on to his individual identity; he struggles with his tendency to cling to his friends' opinions, especially those belonging to Jason and Aurit. Hannah sees this in him and points it out as one of the problems in their relationship. But ironically, it turns out to be Greer Cohen, whom he had originally viewed as shallow and ditzy, who he can carry on a satisfying relationship, where his identity is not lost. Further, his friends do not particularly care for Greer, but Nate does not care in the end of it. He not only moves in with Greer, but resigns himself to this imperfect relationship as being enough. Sadly though, he feels a strong sense of loss and regret when thinking about Hannah, whom he knows, if perhaps he tried harder, he could have stayed with and made a success.



It is not enough to be sincere to arrive at self-knowledge

The author emphasizes the theme of her epigraph by George Eliot through the characterization of the novel's main protagonist. The author chose a quote by George Eliot as the epigraph for her novel, which states: "To give a true account of what passes within us, something else is necessary besides sincerity." One only understands the meaning of this epigraph at the conclusion of the novel.

The entire novel is an account of Nate's thought process, his internal monologue and rationalizing thoughts. He starts off in the novel wondering why women like Juliet call him an "asshole" when he sees himself as a basically good, caring person. He is sincere in trying to understand why he fails at relationships. Yet this is not enough to come to a self-understanding. As the novel develops, we see the need for what Eliot said, that if one is to understand himself, he must be more than just sincere in his motives; he needs to step outside of himself and observe how his actions truly affect others, as dispassionately as possible. To think about the concerns of others and not just his own. As much as he does try, he never does completely succeed.

Nate seems to succeed in understanding his part of the blame in larger issues, such as how he is too complicit in the suffering or exploitation of others. That is even the theme of his newest writing effort. But when he ruminates on why Juliet is upset, for example, he cannot get past his own assessment of himself as not as bad as other guys, who he says would have bolted as soon as they found out the woman they slept with was pregnant. Not him. He went with her to the abortion, spent the whole day with her. Called her. But then he probably should have contacted her after that. He goes on to rationalize that it was best not to give Juliet hope that he would be her boyfriend, not thinking about how perhaps that was not her desire at all, that she just needed support beyond the abortion.

Even when he catches himself in the pattern of nit-picking and trying to find fault with Hannah, as he always does when someone gets close, he goes on with this behavior anyway. When he sees Hannah one more time in the last chapter, we are told that even "now, it was hard for him to say why he'd been unhappy with Hannah" (239). Apparently, he had sincerely tried to figure it out, but could not. Maybe it was as George Eliot said, he failed to do that something else that is needed beyond sincerity, facing your faults and trying something different from what you have always done. At least that is the sense one gets when done with this dramedy of manners.



Styles

Point of View

The novel is written in third-person limited, primarily from the perspective of Nate. This makes sense since the novel for the most part works as a kind of anthropological study of a middle-class modern man living in a major city. By choosing a third-person limited perspective to tell Nate's story, the author has the advantage of offering his perspective while remaining at somewhat of a distance.

Most of the 17 chapters of the novel consist of Nate's thought process, his internal monologue. Interspersed are flashbacks to his past, which help explain what in his background might have led to his situation in the present. Several chapters consist of scenes between Nate and the other primary character of Hannah, between Nate and one of his friends or parents, all of which provide some perspective outside of Nate's mind. His interactions with friends and lovers are a large part of his characterization.

Language and Meaning

Much of the language used in the novel reflects a cynical tone because one of Nate's traits is that of cynicism when it comes to relationships and the roles both men and women play. Reference is often made to liberal guilt and gentrification which time and again are linked to Nate's strong feelings of guilt.

Structure

The novel consists of 17 chapters, most of which contain Nate's internal monologue, a presentation of his thought process. A handful of chapters use flashback to fill in his past, while others focus on scenes between Nate and a minor character to the plot. Nate appears in every scene because he is the primary focus, his internal life as he strives to balance his literary life with his love life.



Quotes

To give a true account of what passes within us, something else is necessary besides sincerity.

-- Epigraph: George Eliot (Epigraph)

Importance: This quote by George Eliot which the author chose to use as the epigraph for the novel is the most important quote of all because it demonstrates the point that the author is making. Adelman means to prove that it is not enough to be sincere in your motives to arrive at self-awareness; you need to not only consider the needs of others and their welfare, but step outside of yourself to do so. Nate is sincere in trying to understand why he has failed at relationships, but he also rationalizes away his own faults. In the end, he never really reaches true self-awareness to satisfaction. He ends up resigned to his fate.

You could have at least---

-- Juliet (chapter 1)

Importance: Juliet says this to Nate when she confronts him on the street in Chapter 1. It is this scene that sets Nate off on a mission to discover why women consider him an asshole. When she trails off like this, it sets Nate off into anxiety over what she might mean.

It's about how one of the privileges of being elite is that we outsource the act of exploitation."

-- Nate (chapter 1)

Importance: When Nate's friends at Elisa's dinner party ask him what his essay is about, this is his answer. He is concerned about the way that people of his class, including himself, of the privileged distance themselves from exploitation by getting others to do things they themselves do not want to do, such as hiring cheap labor from Mexico to clean their houses. This for Nate, is the highest form of exploitation under capitalism that he feels guilty about.

Nate had not always been the kind of guy women call an asshole. Only recently had he been popular enough to inspire such ill will."

-- Narrator (chapter 2)

Importance: The narrator of the novel makes this statement as a way to characterize Nate further. He had not always been considered by women as an asshole. What led him to become one? What was his childhood like? The narrator hopes to answer these questions through flashback, by giving a biography of Nate. proves that Nate being considered an jerk was a culmination of life events or experience that influenced him to behave the way he does, especially in relationships with women.



Kristen's seal of approval would, through some new air of self-confidence, be transmitted to all other pretty girls."

-- Narrator (chapter 2)

Importance: At one point, Nate depended on the status of the woman he dated for his sense of self and to feel good about himself. Kristen was his first real girlfriend, and because he considered her above him in the social ladder, he thought of her as a means to social status.

Doesn't it matter that forms of exploitation that were openly tolerated in the past have been forced under the table? Doesn't that say something about how our conception of what's acceptable has changed?"

-- Hannah (chapter 3)

Importance: After Elisa's dinner party, Nate gets this email from Hannah, where she extends their conversation on liberal guilt. In an effort to challenge Nate's view on liberal guilt, Hannah asks this question. She means that since people tend to hide under the table exploitative behavior, whereas in the past people openly tolerated it, that this must signal recognition that exploitation is not acceptable.

Many of his friends were far colder and more connoisseur-like in their attitudes toward women's appearances, as if the tenderer feelings that had animated the crushes of their younger years had been spent."

-- Narrator (chapter 3)

Importance: Nate likes to see himself as above the misogyny and pretensions of his male counterparts. He recognizes that their youth had once been innocent and feelings more tender than now. This insight makes for some sympathy for Nate, that he is not as bad as his male friends are. It also shows a nostalgia for the innocence of youth.

Stop overthinking, dude. You're acting like a girl."

-- Jason (chapter 3)

Importance: This is one of the things that Jason had said to Nate that really grated his nerves. Basically, Jason thought that Nate thought too much and this he considered a trait of girls. This is one of several occasions when Jason proves himself to be even more of an jerk than Nate. He is a misogynist and condescending toward women in general.

I think it's vanity to want it both ways. You know, to want to write books because that's your thing but also to want to be treated like a rock star."

-- Hannah (chapter 4)

Importance: This is another challenge Hannah makes to Nate's views. She shows herself to be an idealist. For Nate, it is hard to imagine any writer not also wanting attention or fame for what they write.



As she flitted from topic to topic, Nate began to feel as if he were watching her from a remove, evaluating her."

-- Narrator (chapter 13)

Importance: This is not the only reference the narrator makes to Nate's habit of listing his partner's faults in his mind. This is one way he sabotages an otherwise good relationship.

You know that the other stuff is all vanity, right? Writing, I mean."

-- Hannah (chapter 14)

Importance: By this point, there is quite a bit of resentment between Hannah and Nate. Here Hannah recognizes that writing and his book are the most important things in his life. She envies this status that writing holds for Nate, whereas she feels she is being cast aside.

Sometimes I think I've lost something...Some capacity to be with another person, something I used to have...I feel pretty fucked, to tell the truth."

-- Nate (chapter 15)

Importance: Ironically, Nate seems to be self-aware at this point yet ingenuous at the same time, as inside he knows what he is doing, sabotaging yet another relationship and realizing that there is nothing technically wrong with Hannah. He is self-aware in this way yet allows himself to continue in the same destructive pattern.