

Middlesex Study Guide

Middlesex by Jeffrey Eugenides

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Plot Summary

Middlesex, a Pulitzer Prize winning novel by Jeffrey Eugenides, spans the lives of three generations of the Stephanides family. Protagonist Calliope (Cal) Stephanides undergoes a spiritual rebirth as he comes to terms with his family's history and how it inevitably led to his hermaphroditic birth. The story takes place in 1922 in Bithynios, Greece. Lefty and Desdemona Stephanides, brother and sister, have lost their parents in the recent war with Turkey. They have an unhealthy attraction to one another. When the Turks move to reclaim their village, Lefty and Desdemona flee, traveling first to Smyrna and then sailing to America. Along the way, they pick up an Armenian, Dr. Philobosian, who lost his entire family in the Turkish invasion. Being anonymous on the ship, Lefty and Desdemona act out an elaborate courtship and get married.

The Stephanides lose Dr. Philobosian at Ellis Island and take a train to Detroit to live with their cousin Sourmelina (Lina), who is a closet lesbian, and her husband Jimmy Zizmo. They swear Lina to secrecy about their relationship. Jimmy, a rum-runner, gets Lefty a job at the Ford factory, but Lefty is fired because of Jimmy's unsavory reputation. At the same time, both Desdemona and Lina become pregnant. Desperate for cash, Lefty helps Jimmy import booze. Dr. Philobosian finally arrives in Detroit. He inadvertently fills Desdemona with fear about inbred babies.

Lina gives birth to a healthy girl, Theodora (Tessie). Jimmy is paranoid that Lina has had an affair. Desdemona gives birth to Milton, an equally healthy boy, at the same time. Lefty opens a speakeasy in the basement to support the family. After the repeal of prohibition, he turns it into legitimate bar called The Zebra Room.

When Milton and Tessie reach the age of twenty, they begin a strange musical courtship. Desdemona, ever fearful of genetics, tries to keep them apart. After Tessie becomes engaged to Mike Antoniou, a soon-to-be Greek Orthodox priest, a devastated Milton joins the Navy. He is stationed in San Diego. Watching the newsreels at home, Tessie realizes her true feelings. Milton comes home safely. Much to Mike's chagrin, Tessie and Milton get married. Mike is left to marry Zoe. Milton takes over the Zebra Room, turning it into a neighborhood diner. He and Tessie have a son. Then, they decide they want a daughter, so they use "science" to manipulate biology to their will. Desdemona predicts they will have another son, but Calliope is born a healthy baby girl. Dr. Philobosian, who delivers her, fails to notice she is a hermaphrodite. On the same day Callie is born, Lefty has the first of a series of strokes, rendering him mute.

As the neighborhood becomes shabby and the family faces financial ruin, race riots destroy The Zebra Room, giving Milton the insurance capital to start a successful hot dog chain. The family moves to the well-to-do suburb of Grosse Pointe, where eight year old Callie meets a little girl named Clementine. Clementine's kisses give Callie the idea that she is different from most girls. At the same time, Lefty dies. Desdemona takes to her bed permanently.



At age fourteen, Callie is attending a private school for girls when she falls in love with a girl she calls the Obscure Object. The girls start a secret sexual relationship. Jerome, the Object's jealous brother, guesses their secret and causes Callie to have an accident. In the emergency room, doctors finally discover her double genitalia. Shocked, Milton and Tessie take her to New York City to see a specialist, Dr. Luce. Callie, wanting to be normal, lies to Dr. Luce about her feelings, and he recommends that Callie continue to live as a girl. But, Callie sees the report describing her as genetically male. Knowing her true feelings, she runs away.

Cutting her hair and calling herself Cal, he arrives in San Francisco where he works in a strip club for a man named Bob Presto. Cal meets another hermaphrodite and starts to accept himself. When the club is raided and Cal is arrested, he finally calls his parents, only to discover Milton is dead. He was killed in an automobile chase after being the victim of a kidnapping scam.

Chapter Eleven retrieves Cal from California. He takes his new gender in stride. Arriving home, Tessie has a harder time dealing with it. However, she wants to accept Cal out of maternal love. Desdemona, in a rare moment of lucidity, reveals the genetic map that led to Cal's condition. While the others attend Milton's funeral, Cal acts out the traditional Greek rite of keeping Milton's spirit from returning to the house.

Cal writes his memoir in 2001 while working for the Foreign Service in Berlin. He meets an Asian-American woman, Julie Kikuchi, whom he likes very much. Before things get serious, he cuts Julie out of his life. However, when they run into each other at an art exhibit, he gathers the courage to reveal that he is a hermaphrodite. They agree to give their relationship a real chance.



The Silver Spoon - Matchmaking

Summary

Tessie and Milton Stephanides decide to have a second child, specifically a girl, when their son Chapter Eleven, is five. Milton follows the “medical” advice of their long-time family friend and chiropractor, Peter Tatakis, who has theories on sperm and body temperature. Milton buys his wife a special thermometer, but Tessie has reservations about playing God, as well as the detached, clinical way Milton approaches making a baby. Her mother-in-law, Desdemona, subtly tries to warn Tessie not to get pregnant again, without explaining her anxiety. At Assumption Greek Orthodox Church, Tessie has an uncomfortable run-in with her former fiancé, Father Michael Antoniou, who is now married to Milton’s sister.

On Easter Sunday 1959, Tessie’s temperature rises. Milton abandons an Easter egg game with Chapter Eleven to take advantage of the situation. Cal, the narrator of the novel, is conceived that day. Before the birth, Desdemona dangles a silver spoon over Tessie’s pregnant belly in order to predict the baby’s sex. She has accurately predicted the gender of twenty-three babies. Desdemona announces Tessie is having a boy, but Milton brushes the prediction aside. Calliope, a baby girl, is born on January 8, 1960. Her birth is much to the surprise and disappointment of Desdemona. Cal’s grandfather suffers the first of thirteen strokes the same day.

Moving back in time to 1922, the story returns to the youth of Cal’s grandmother, 21-year-old Desdemona, who raises silkworms to support herself and her brother Eleutherios (Lefty). Their parents were killed in the recently ended war with the Turks that created a unified Greek nation, including their small village of Bithynios on Mount Olympus. Desdemona is resentful of Lefty’s meandering trips to the town of Bursa to sell their cocoons. Only a year apart in age, they have always been best friends. However, Lefty is now embracing the modern world of American music, silk suits, and hashish. Desdemona feels inexplicably jealous, especially when Lefty reveals he spends so much time in Bursa because he wants a woman. Determined that her brother not marry a Turkish woman, Desdemona sets about improving the only two eligible women in Bithynios, teaching them to pose like lingerie models.

Meanwhile, in Bursa, Lefty struggles through his duties as a cocoon seller. He loathes the dramatic haggling of the marketplace. Knowingly, he undervalues the Stephanides’ cocoons. He stops at a church and prays to stop having certain unhealthy thoughts. He drinks and gambles until he finds himself in a brothel, where he chooses a girl who looks alarmingly like Desdemona, with long braided hair, sorrowful eyes, and a voluptuously curvy body. Knowing his incestuous feelings are wrong, over the next few days he plays along with Desdemona’s attempts to pair him off with one of the two available village girls. As he goes to court them, Desdemona bemoans her own chances of marriage, imagining she will keep house for her brother and his new wife. Yet, Lefty cannot stand to spend even a moment with either girl, soon coming home or jokingly



avowing to marry Desdemona herself. They embrace as siblings, but it soon deepens into another sort of intimacy as they dance around their yard. Suddenly they hear explosions in the distance as the Turks' surprise attack sends the Greek Army into retreat.

Analysis

Cal is telling his own story, looking back on his life and his ancestry, from the age of forty-one. Why does he feel compelled to reflect at this specific moment in his life? He claims he feels "another birth coming on" (Page 3); readers should be on the lookout for clues about the reason for this rebirth. Cal narrates in vivid detail things that happened before he was born. He is privy to his parents' thoughts at his conception and his grandparents' unspoken lust for one another. However, there is no evidence to indicate that Cal is not a reliable narrator.

Bits of Greek mythology are woven throughout the novel. As a Greek-American, these stories act as a sort of extended personal history for Cal: "Sorry if I get a little Homeric at times. That's genetic, too" (Page 4). Mythology is in his blood more than it would be if he were descended from any other nationality. The word "hermaphrodite" comes directly from a Greek myth, and "Calliope" is the name of the Muse who inspires "epic poetry." The scope of the novel, spanning generations and continents is certainly epic in a modern way. By invoking the Muses to inspire him to tell his own story, he acknowledges the universal and timelessness of myth. He is not the world's first hermaphrodite (Cal further mentions the famous seer, Tiresias, who was also both a man and a woman at different points in his life), nor is he the first person from a loving, but complicated, sometimes hurtful, family that gets swept up in national struggles.

Sexuality and gender will both play a major role throughout the novel. However, although they are interconnected, they are two separate issues. Even in the first chapters, readers will note some strange notions of sexuality, such as Tessie's idea that an embryo can sense how much love went into its creation (Page 8). These ideas seem to be genetic because Tessie's aunt Desdemona believes, as she was taught by her mother, that a woman must be morally pure to make good, pure silk. Desdemona is afraid of her own voluptuous body, ashamed of the attention it receives against her will. Grappling with sexuality and coming to terms with its inherent naturalness rather than a demon to be feared has been a struggle across all the Stephanides' generations.

Tessie's and Milton's opposing views on whether they can manipulate nature in order to have the daughter they both want encapsulate three major themes of the novel. First, like sexuality, religion is treated with a sense of mystery and confusion. Tessie, who can't quite make herself believe in God, still fears that by trying to control the gender of their child, she and Milton are taking on God-like power, for which they may well be punished. Milton, on the other hand, believes firmly in progress and the American Dream, of a nation in which one has only to think something to make it a reality. This tussle between husband and wife demonstrates the tension between "destiny" and "free will" that the novel will turn to again and again. Milton believes he can control his fate,



but Tessie thinks, in her own version of cause and effect, that efforts to thwart destiny will only result in divine retribution. Cal, himself, sides with Destiny, dwelling on how unlikely it was that the recessive chromosomal mutation that creates hermaphrodites actually manifested in him. This suits the permeation of mythology in the narrative. Characters in myths are always victims of fate.

Another manifestation of the American Dream motif comes through Chapter Eleven, who “wanted more than anything to believe in an American God who got resurrected on the right day” (Page 15). Besides further perpetuating the strangely ambivalent relationship between the Stephanides clan and God, Chapter Eleven’s shame at celebrating Greek Orthodox Easter on a different day than his friends celebrate Christian Easter demonstrates a desire to fit in and to assimilate fully into American culture. It foreshadows that Chapter Eleven may eventually turn his back on his heritage. Chapter Eleven’s quandary is not unique in the narrative: his grandmother lives at the other end of the spectrum, trying to stay as Greek as possible even in her new “melting pot” of a nation. There is a duality to each character’s sense of identity, which is given its most prominent manifestation in Cal himself, who is caught between two genders, male in some ways and female in others. Though he lives as a man, he writes his memoir in the typically “female” way, with a circularity of narrative shape. Cal mentions events from the future while still in the past, flitting from event to event or grouping them thematically rather than chronologically. Like mythology, this technique underscores the cyclical nature of history in which the same mistakes are made time and again across generations.

Desdemona’s desire to keep Lefty from marrying a Turkish woman is a form of racism that will be repeated frequently throughout the novel. Readers should keep a keen eye out for the ways people develop prejudices against groups, even as those in other groups hate them.

Vocabulary

Palpate, contingent, incongruous, dubious, chaste, malign, exorbitant, transcendent, nonchalance, interminable, immoderate, harangue, elliptical, barrage.



An Immodest Proposal - The Silk Road

Summary

In the present, Cal, who lives in Berlin as part of the Foreign Service's cultural division, rides the U-bahn on his daily commute, when an Asian girl catches his attention. He intuitively senses from her old-fashioned bike that she is American. They briefly make eye contact before she exits the U-bahn, but Cal cannot get her out of his mind.

Cal reverses the story back to 1922, as Desdemona and Lefty decide to travel to America to avoid the encroaching Turkish army. Desdemona packs some silkworm eggs, hoping she can generate income in America, and they join the stream of refugees in Smyrna in August 1922. But General Hajienestis, the Greek in charge of defense, is far removed from reality, and orders the evacuation of the Greek army, leaving thousands of refugees stranded, as European battleships in Smyrna's harbor look on passively.

In the Armenian neighborhood of Smyrna, a doctor named Nishan Philobosian believes his family will be safe because he has a signed letter proclaiming he treated the Turkish general, Mustafa Kemal Pasha. As he goes to retrieve this letter from his office, he runs into Lefty scavenging for food. Dr. Philobosian treats a cut on Lefty's hand, giving him some money, but certain Lefty will soon die. Lefty buys bread and returns to Desdemona at the docks to eat. They await the Greek ships that they are sure will evacuate them. Though Lefty has given in to his long-simmering feelings for his sister, Desdemona shuns his touch, feeling their sinfulness.

Upset with Desdemona's reluctance, Lefty goes to find more food. He stumbles upon an abandoned casino and an impromptu poker game. Lefty quickly picks up the rules and wins most of the table's money, but rather than face the wrath of his competitors, he loses it all again, hiding just enough in his shoe to buy passage to Athens – but the price has tripled in a single day.

When the Greek fleet finally leaves, the Greeks are defenseless against the advancing Turks, who torch Smyrna, forcing the refugees to the docks. In the Armenian Quarter, Dr. Philobosian and his family hide as their neighbors' homes blaze. The doctor briefly crosses the street to help a screaming neighbor, only to find her beyond help. By the time he returns home, his own family has been cut to pieces by the Turks, who were illiterate and could not read his signed letter.

As the fires creep toward the docks, a bureaucrat from the French consulate hands out visas to French citizens. Lefty makes Desdemona promise to marry him if they survive and uses his rudimentary French to claim two visas. When Lefty returns triumphantly to Desdemona, he finds Dr. Philobosian with her; Desdemona saved him from throwing himself into the harbor. Lefty gets one more visa for his "cousin." They soon find



themselves on a ship called the Jean Bart, departing a still burning Smyrna, where 100,000 refugees will die.

Upon arriving in Athens, Lefty, Desdemona, and Dr. Philobosian get passports and vaccinations before boarding a ship called the Giulia to New York. Dr. Philobosian spends most of the voyage curled up in bed, grieving for his family, or threatening to throw himself overboard, but Lefty convinces him to come with them all the way to Detroit, where they have a cousin.

Meanwhile, Lefty and Desdemona have set up an elaborate scheme to convince their fellow passengers of their slowly emerging courtship, pretending they are strangers gradually getting to know each other day by day, planting the seeds for an engagement. They walk the decks and invent family genealogies, trying to convince themselves that they do not share a history. The other passengers think Lefty is of a higher social class than Desdemona, based on the way he dresses, but they celebrate when the ship's captain, Kontoulis, marries them.

Desdemona, who carried her wedding corset from home, even though she never thought she'd have a hope of marriage, wears it on their first night together, in a lifeboat. Though each feels a twinge of guilt at what they have done, they can't help but enjoy themselves as they make love. They spend every night together in the lifeboat, continuing to spool out an imaginary past so detailed they come to believe it. Lefty dreams of opening a casino in Detroit, while Desdemona wants him to go to college. She worries their cousin, Sourmelina, will reveal their secret, but Lefty knows Sourmelina has secrets of her own. They prepare for the Ellis Island immigration test, memorizing Biblical passages and clutching their "de-loused" certification.

Analysis

Cal is a self-conscious narrator, interrupting himself and referencing the structure of his own story, pointing out themes to the reader (as when he points out that Smyrna was founded by Amazons, women warriors whom he identifies with due to the enacted duality in their gender; or his simple riffing on the history of Smyrna, its duality as a city that blends East and West). On Page 57 he adds a parenthetical connecting the fires Desdemona witnessed in burning Smyrna to Desdemona's fear and disdain for a fire in a fireplace later in life. This shifting fluidly through time and self-awareness of the way past and present connect gives the novel a postmodern structure and the tone of a memoir, the format it fictionalizes.

As part of Cal's "feminine" storytelling technique, there is no cause-and-effect development. He includes the detail that as Lefty and Desdemona are evacuating from Smyrna, a Major on a nearby British military ship turns a blind eye while his crew pulls an eleven-year-old girl out of the water against their official policy of nonintervention. There is no further mention of this girl or her fate, and little likelihood she will resurface later in America. This detail adds a layer to the overall picture of chaos in the Smyrna



harbor. But, it is an unnecessary detail, a facet a more masculine storyteller might delete because it does not move Cal's story forward.

Another important structural element occurs when Cal shifts from the past tense to the present (even when describing events in the past.) He narrates Lefty's trip to the steamship office in the present tense, adding a sense of immediacy and urgency to this task. It further underscores the way in which Cal is continually working to connect his present to his past, as if time itself were on a loop repeating itself rather than moving from one form (now) to another (then). Readers should watch out for other moments written in the present tense and think about why Cal is emphasizing them.

Cal points out, "You used to be able to tell a person's nationality by the face" (Page 40). His point could just as easily apply to gender, underscoring one of the major themes of the novel: everyone is more than one thing; no one can be reduced to a single word description in this continually evolving world. He further makes the point by discussing his connection and disconnection from the girl, Calliope, he once was. Though he looks like and lives his life fully as a man, Cal's feminine mannerisms and habits still exist inside him and surprise him at odd moments.

On Page 56, Eugenides uses personification to describe the fire that runs rampant in Smyrna. The device creates a more vivid description of the fire's destruction, making it feel more personal and horrifying.

At the beginning of "The Silk Road," the fourth chapter of the novel, Cal textures his story with more mythology, that of the spread of silk out of China. He says, "Like her I unravel my story, and the longer the thread, the less there is left to tell. Retrace the filament and you go back to the cocoon's beginning in a tiny knot, a first tentative loop" (Page 63). Besides encapsulating the personal history of Desdemona's silkworm tending, the metaphor of a physical thread of connection (between people and across time) is woven throughout the novel. As they sail from Athens, balls of yarn unwind between passengers and the family left behind as part of a longstanding custom, but the metaphor is clear: even as immigrants leave home to pursue better opportunities, their desire to hold on to home is strong.

As Cal points out, the silk legend "mutated" in Western storytelling into the discovery of gravity. This specific word choice reminds readers of Cal's own mutated gene, how mythologies and people evolve, and how fact and fiction blend to form a higher truth.

Readers watch this self-mythologizing play out as Lefty and Desdemona build their history from scratch, "Aware that whatever happened now would become the truth, that whatever he seemed to be would become what he was—already an American, in other words" (Page 67). Just as Cal points out that he was born twice, once as a girl and once as a boy, Lefty and Desdemona are reborn from brother and sister to husband and wife. Rebirth comprises a major theme of the novel and a major theme of America itself. Immigrants come from around the world to reinvent themselves. After this first rebirth, the Stephanides will face the challenge of being re-created as Americans rather than Greeks (who lived in Turkey, a duality they already navigated).



In describing the marriage ceremony of Lefty and Desdemona, Cal finds fertile metaphorical ground: “Desdemona and Lefty circumambulated the captain, once, twice, and then again, spinning the cocoon of their life together. No patriarchal linearity here. We Greeks get married in circles, to impress upon ourselves the essential matrimonial facts: that to be happy you have to find variety in repetition; that to go forward you have to come back where you began” (Pages 68-69). Their physical actions mirror Cal’s narrative structure and the themes of the cyclical nature of history and the catharsis of coming full circle. The Silk Road ends with a nice button of foreshadowing and a statement on gender stereotypes: Desdemona assumes because the Statue of Liberty that guards America is a woman, this is a testament to the pacifist nature of the nation. In 1922, there was plenty of violence in America’s future. The terror of Smyrna will repeat itself in Desdemona’s life.

Vocabulary

Expatriate, placid, peripheral, lucid, vitreous, pallor, arduous, rebuff, elegiac, execrable, simulate, segue, prudent, circumambulate, assail, sporadic, finagle, turpitude, quail, discern.



Henry Ford's English-Language Melting Pot - Minotaurs

Summary

Lefty and Desdemona arrive in Detroit by train after having successfully survived Ellis Island. They lost Dr. Philobosian, who was marked because of an eye infection. Desdemona is forced to cut her waist-length hair and throw away her "parasitic" silkworm eggs. Though Lefty takes comfort in the Greek architecture as the world flies by during their journey, America is taller and more mechanized than their homeland, with an unpleasant chemical smell.

They arrive at Grand Trunk Station, and Lefty leaves Desdemona while he searches for their cousin, Sourmelina (Lina) Zizmo, whom he barely recognizes in her flapper dress and thinned out accent. Sourmelina, aged 28, teases Lefty about his new wife and abandoned sister until Lefty makes clear to her that Desdemona is his wife. Desdemona begs Lina to keep their secret, and Lina takes it in stride, having secrets of her own. For instance, she had an unseemly history with girls in Bithynios until her father arranged a marriage for her in America.

Lina's husband, Jimmy Zizmo, aged 45, treated marriage as a negotiated deal. He is shocked that Lefty impulsively married for love. Lina doesn't mind Jimmy's Turkish appearance, lowly physical stature, dubious business ventures, or attempts to boss her around. She evades his determined requests to procreate. Lefty hints to Jimmy that he could help in his (not entirely aboveboard) importing business, but Jimmy uses bribery to secure Lefty a job at the Ford Company. Lefty starts his job at the factory called "the Rouge," grinding gears on the assembly line and attending Ford's English school in the evenings. He quickly learns not to work too hard at the factory in order to maintain peace among his co-workers.

Without her silkworms, Desdemona pours herself into cooking and entertaining Jimmy's associates with Old World delicacies. By spring of 1923, Lefty is a top student ready to graduate from the English school. Desdemona sews him a traditional Greek garment for his graduation pageant while Lefty purchases a conservative blue American suit. One evening two men from the Ford Sociological Department visit the Stephanides, examining the household to ensure it is up to Henry Ford's standards of moral righteousness and physical hygiene. They are unimpressed by Jimmy's snide asides, urging Lefty to get his own home.

Desdemona and Lina suddenly find themselves nauseous from the strange smells. They realize they are both pregnant. They attend Lefty's pageant, where Lefty gets stirred up in the "Ford English School Melting Pot." But as soon as the curtain descends the men from the Ford Sociological Department hand him a pink slip because of Jimmy's police record.



Cal backpedals to the night Desdemona and Lina both become pregnant: March 24, 1923. The two couples had gone to see a vaudeville production of the Greek myth of the Minotaur; Desdemona is shocked by the scantily clad dancing chorus girls and nearly nude actor with a papier-mâché bull's head. Despite herself Desdemona is aroused by the performance and allows Lefty's amorous advances that night. Similarly turned on by the chorus girls, Lina makes love to her husband for the first time in five months.

The two pregnant women are frequently sick, and Lefty and Jimmy frequent coffee shops avoiding their wives' hormones and arguing politics. Jimmy has an oddly pro-Turkish viewpoint. Jimmy takes Lefty into his "importing" business, distributing illegal alcohol from Canada during Prohibition (despite Jimmy's personal abstinence). Jimmy recklessly infringes on the territory of the main Detroit rum-runners, the Purple Gang, and Lefty worries about getting deported. But desperate for income, he joins Jimmy on runs at 3 in the morning to Belle Isle to pick up Canadian shipments.

The months pass as Lina's and Desdemona's bodies swell. Desdemona feels maternal pride, but Lina fears how the pregnancy will affect her lifestyle. One morning Dr. Philobosian appears at their doorstep, having survived immigration because of his medical skills. He marvels at the odds of the double conception, and Jimmy wonders if Lina cheated on him. Desdemona, meanwhile, bargains with God after Dr. Philobosian mentions that natal deformities result from inbreeding.

As Jimmy sinks into a paranoid brood that makes him sloppy in his work and Lefty worries about getting caught, Desdemona use her silver spoon for the first time to predict the sex of Lina's baby. Lina is desperate for a girl, though Desdemona thinks girls are difficult. But Lina gets her wish; Desdemona predicts a girl, and on December 17, Lina gives birth to a daughter she names Theodora, who spends a week in the hospital's incubator. Jimmy can't believe she is his daughter. He takes Lefty out on a rum-running mission, driving his Packard right onto the frozen river. He accuses Lefty of having an affair with Lina. Lefty, keeping an eye out for thin black ice, is terrified as Jimmy drives recklessly. Lefty throws himself from the car, just in time to watch Jimmy and the Packard crash through a patch of thin ice.

Meanwhile at home, Desdemona has a nightmare of the lifeboat of the ship Giulia. Captain Kontoulis assists Lefty in delivering the baby, pulling it out of her womb via a rope. Blood spatters and the baby emerges, without arms or legs, just a gaping mouth. Desdemona wakes in a fright to find her water has actually broken. She and Lina go to the hospital, where Dr. Philobosian delivers a healthy baby boy, whom they name Miltiades, Americanized to Milton. Both babies are perfectly healthy, except for one mutated chromosome each, that no one can see.

Analysis

Cal describes Detroit's circular civic plan, created in the early nineteenth century. It is mirrored by creating an arc in space and time by telling about an incident from Callie's



ninth year of life in 1969 when she and Milton had peered down at the spokes of Detroit's central wheel from a top floor restaurant. Through this device, Cal and Eugenides tie the fate of the city itself with Cal's personal story, emphasizing the cyclical nature of history and a single life. The personal and historical are further intertwined in the anecdote concerning Betty Ford's wig made from Desdemona's hair. Interconnection is a major theme in the novel.

Cal uses this circular storytelling technique frequently, and readers should recall he believes this is a "feminine" story structure. He jumps back and forth in time to make connection between past and present – the importance of the Minotaur play to his family history, the not-really-coincidental anecdote of a young Callie and Milton bonding over a cheesy minotaur movie in the 1960s – fully wrapping readers in the depth and significance of the narrative rather than delivering it in small chronological chunks. The insertion of the Minotaur film anecdote also builds tension as readers wonder if Lefty will die with Jimmy on the frozen river.

Desdemona's earlier faith in the Statue of Liberty as symbol of America's feminine, peaceful nature is subtly contrasted by the description of America's landscape as they travel to the Midwest: America is tall, built of skyscrapers and factory smokestacks, creating phallic imagery, and emphasizing a male-dominated way of thinking. Lefty's sense of history and connection in the faux-Greek architecture is misplaced in this electrified, fast-paced young nation.

Sourmelina and Jimmy Zizmo create an interesting picture of gender dynamics. Lina, a lesbian, uses marriage to her advantage. She gets to buy nice clothes, smoke, and listen to her favorite radio programs. Jimmy, who presents himself as the ultra-masculine gangster who sees marriage as a contract for "housekeeping and for children" (Page 90) cannot force his wife into her "proper" gender role. His fears of impotence manifest when he claims, "Women aren't like us. They have carnal natures. The best thing to do with them is to shut them up in a maze" (Page 113). He is desperate to control his wife, yet Lina drives a car against his protests and withholds sex when she pleases (despite her "carnal nature"). Lina left the traditional gender role of kitchen and babies far behind in Bithynios. She has taken immediately to the modern American culture.

When Cal steps out of the narrative to offer commentary on the ways Henry Ford and assembly line factories have caused an evolutionary change in humanity itself because "we've all inherited it to some degree, so that we plug right into joysticks and remotes, to repetitive motions of a hundred kinds" (Page 95). He does not merely speak of dependence on modern technology. He also makes note of the human tendency to act in patterns without thinking, thereby creating personal cycles of behavior that are impossible to escape. Again, history repeats itself. Eugenides uses language itself to reinforce his themes, repeating verbatim the actions of the assembly line, lulling readers with this hypnotic reiteration.

One major theme of the novel is that of duality, of two ideas battling to exist in one entity. The Minotaur imagery that infuses the chapter of the same name, is an overt



metaphor of this duality: half bull, half man, lost in a maze (readers should also note the yarn Theseus uses in the myth to find his way out of the maze: it is a recurring symbol of connection, as readers saw when the ship sailed from Greece). Lefty getting stirred into “Henry Ford’s American Melting Pot” demonstrates this tension. The Ford Company hopes to scrub all the ethnicity out of its employees, leaving them all (repetitively) the same in their conservative American suits. This struggle between cultural heritage and American assimilation will haunt the Stephanides’ clan through every generation.

Cal uses his current home of Berlin as a metaphor for duality. East and West only recently rejoined into a unified whole, just as Cal grapples with uniting his two gender identities. He further connects Berlin to Detroit: “Coming from a city still cut in half by racial hatred, I feel hopeful here in Berlin” (Page 106). He strives for self-acceptance and peace for both himself and his hometown, yet his desire to keep moving rather than settling in a single location or country begs the question: is Cal’s constant motion moving him in a circle or a straight line? Does he ever actually get anywhere when he’s always on the go?

On Page 109, Cal calls to “Freeze the action.” As a narrator, Cal is not a typical passive and detached omniscient voice. He is emotionally involved in the story, frequently stopping it to offer analysis and self-consciously pointing out his themes (the metaphor of the minotaur) and foreshadowing (linking Lefty’s seduction of a “sleeping” Desdemona to his own future action with an unnamed girl – history repeating itself). Cal believes that besides genetic physicality, “all sorts of other things get passed down, too: motifs, scenarios, even fates” (Page 109). He doesn’t mention it, but his own continuing sense of shame about his sexuality, at age 41 in 2001 is passed down from his grandmother’s shame at her arousal while watching the Minotaur play in 1923. Born a girl, Cal was unconsciously taught to be embarrassed at the needs of the body, a feeling he can’t shake even as a man. When Cal mentions Desdemona’s maternal glow during pregnancy, which connects her down through history to the mother of humanity herself, he subconsciously underscores their physical shame as a birthright from the loss of Eden. Desdemona encapsulates the problem of self-negation in female gender identity when she admonishes Lina against wanting a daughter, claiming, “Girls are too much trouble” (Page 118).

Though the novel is written in the past tense, Cal occasionally switches to the present tense. One example of the change in tense occurs when he recounts the lead up to and birth of the babies and Jimmy’s self-destruction on the frozen river. Switching tenses ties the past to a present moment that continues to play a pivotal role in family dynamics.

Vocabulary

Eponymous, aesthetic, expediency, monolith, jovial, dissipate, multifarious, aversion, inexplicable, rectitude, strophe, tout, dorsal, restitution, beneficence.



Marriage on Ice - Tricknology

Summary

Jimmy Zizmo's funeral takes place thirteen days later, despite the missing body trapped under the refrozen river. Admirably, Lina performs the traditional Greek mourning. As the family and a handful of acquaintances proceed to the church for the funeral, they leave Pete Tatakis to bar the house door against Jimmy's returning spirit, a Greek tradition. After forty days they have another service and a special cake called kolyvo. They believe that Jimmy's soul is finally in heaven. After these rituals, Lina puts on an orange dress. She is finished with her mourning.

The following Saturday Milton and Theodora are baptized, and Desdemona feels guilty about her sinfulness. She distances herself from Lefty sexually and emotionally. Lefty feels snubbed and jealous of Milton. He retreats into a traditional patriarchal role, keeping his wife in her "place." Desperate again for work, Lefty hopes to teach or translate Greek, but is not educated enough. He opens a speakeasy in the basement of the house, dubbing it the Zebra Room. He uses a St. George icon in the window to announce the bar is open, quickly gathering a stable clientele.

Meanwhile, Desdemona raises the children, since Lina is only marginally interested in her infant daughter. Though Desdemona tries to keep her promise to God, she feels guilty for not fulfilling Lefty's needs. She gets pregnant again in 1927. Despite her continued fears, Milton's healthy sister, Zoe Helen, is born on April 27, 1928. Milton and Theodora are inseparable as small children, but by the time Zoe is born, Milton prefers the company of the neighborhood boys. Theodora dotes on her new baby cousin, starting a lifelong friendship.

Lina and Theodora move out, renting rooms in a boarding house nearby. In 1929, the Great Depression spreads across the country, wringing Lefty's business dry. By 1932, at age 30, he has grown frustrated by his wife's continued coldness, and he demands Desdemona get a job. Lina and Desdemona stumble upon a want-ad for a silk worker in the African-American ghetto of Black Bottom. Desdemona is shocked by the neighborhood's poverty and hostility, yet finds herself at a neat, recently converted mosque, reminding her of Turkey. A woman named Sister Wanda, Supreme Captain of Temple No. 1 (founded by Minister Fard for the Nation of Islam) is skeptical of Desdemona's ethnicity but since Sister Wanda needs someone with silk expertise, she hires Desdemona. The temple, wanting to make its own fabric, can't keep the mail-order silkworms alive. Desdemona starts her lesson to a class of "Muslim Girls Training and General Civilization" with the importance of "purity."

Desdemona soon appreciates her job with the Nation of Islam; the Muslim surroundings remind her Turkey. But, the greater disrepair of Black Bottom disgusts her. She never sees the "Prophet" Fard Muhammad, but one day she can hear the Prophet's lectures drifting up through a heating grate from the assembly room below. He explains his



mixed race background; his father foretold that Fard would be a great leader of both races. He preaches of an ancient man named Yacub, who bred white people in order to subjugate blacks. He speaks of the physical and mental superiority of blacks over whites.

Desdemona disagrees when Fard Muhammad proclaims all white people are devils, but listening to his sermons, combined with her own guilty conscience, it infects her. She is obsessed with finding an abnormality in Milton or Zoe, despite Lefty's constant assurances that the kids are thriving. As 1933 approaches, Desdemona discontinues all physical intimacy with her husband. She starts to see how poorly the Black Bottom African-Americans are treated in Detroit, by the city and the people who live there. Meanwhile, Lefty, unable to make the speakeasy pay, organizes photo shoots with a photographer named Maurice Plantagenet, draping scantily clad women over cars, creating highly lucrative erotica.

Fard Muhammad is arrested when one of his supposed followers performs a human sacrifice. He admits the Nation of Islam is a con and the police make him leave Detroit. Desdemona finds herself unemployed. After saying goodbye to the Muslim girls, Desdemona unexpectedly meets Fard Muhammad. He asks her oddly personal questions and she realizes he is Jimmy Zizmo. She scolds him for abandoning his family, but he knows her sinful secrets as well. He leaves Detroit in May of 1933 and never returns, though conspiracy stories dog the rest of his life. Meanwhile, Desdemona goes to see Dr. Philobosian and she has him tie her tubes despite her still young age.

Analysis

Cal gives detailed descriptions of the Greek death rituals surrounding Jimmy's funeral. The traditions were carried from the Old World to the New, offering a sense of continuity at a disruptive time in an unfamiliar place. They act as a metaphor for the duality of the Stephanides, caught between being Greek and American, and Lina's quick casting off of her mourning clothes that demonstrates her allegiance to the more modern American woman's life. Jimmy's death is not particularly tragic, as he is presented as a villain, but given the sprawling, epic nature of the narrative, and its roots in Greek storytelling, readers may well expect to see these traditions enacted with the true sorrow that Greek tragedy is famous for.

The tension of cultural assimilation continues as Lefty wears his Blue Protestant suit while hunting jobs. Despite his change in wardrobe, he is not Protestant and never will be. Though in Greece he would have gone to university and become the scholar he inherently is, in America Lefty is reduced to running an illegal bar. The idea of the "American Dream" plays out throughout Middlesex, and though he provides for his family, Lefty is mostly left out of this mainstream dream world. Cal blatantly foreshadows Lefty's future, pointing out that his youthful gambling habit will come full circle in ruin his life in 1958. Cal similarly calls attention to the fezzes that the Nation of Islam members wear that remind Desdemona of the brutal Turks, an entirely different semiotic context. Cal also foreshadows their future appearance at a funeral; this slick trick almost negates



the importance of the funeral beneath the visual of the fezzes, but readers again should take note that the novel will not end without some tragedy.

Desdemona's interaction with Sister Wanda at the Muslim Temple draws out some more concepts of duality and self-identification. Muhammad Fard is a "mulatto," both black and white. Desdemona comes to recognize that though she is ethnically Greek, she lived in Turkey, which makes her Turkish. Sister Wanda can't hire her if she is white; but the Protestants who wear Lefty's conservative suit would not consider someone as ethnic as a Greek to be white at all. Desdemona, more than anyone, resists incorporating anything American into her sense of self-identity. Yet Desdemona becomes a symbolic example for Detroit when she unconsciously shifts her racist views toward the city's black community to a more sympathetic position. America changes Desdemona despite herself.

Cal spends a great deal of narrative energy describing Detroit, particularly as Desdemona traverses the city in 1932 seeking a job at a Muslim mosque in a black neighborhood, and then further describing the emergence of the Nation of Islam (as well as its leader, Fard Muhammad. Readers might expect from the lengthy discussion of his mysterious roots to learn his true identity, since identity is such an important part of the narrative. It is therefore unsurprising to learn Fard is Jimmy Zizmo and readers will note this revelation to Desdemona near the end of Chapter 8 is pivotal enough for Cal to relate it in the present tense). The fate of Detroit is as much a cause for narrative tension as Cal's own destiny. Besides illuminating Detroit's uncomfortable duality, a city both black and white and unsure how to live together, he lays the groundwork for future "historical" events that will shape the lives of the Stephanides. A city so divided is certain to erupt at some point.

Desdemona, devout in her attendance of the Greek Orthodox Church, has a relationship with God based on constant feelings of guilt and fear of punishment. It is a superstitious, more than a nourishing, faith. She worries that God will punish her sexual impropriety, and she chooses fear over love. In her desire to atone for her great sin, she shuts Lefty out physically and emotionally. Susceptible to all forms of guilt, she even allows the preaching of Muhammad Fard to convince her she is a devil because she is "white." As Cal finds his grandfather's auto-erotic photography at present-day flea markets, he wonders why Lefty chose models who looked nothing like Desdemona. This is the first example of a time when Cal cannot penetrate the mind of another character in his story. There are limits to his omniscience.

Vocabulary

Histrionic, castigate, chiasm, submerge, cognizant, iniquity, amorous, egalitarian, rebuff, stoic, malice, indigenous, derelict, inexorable, clairvoyant, impassive, amicable.



Clarinet Serenade - News of the World

Summary

In the present, Cal goes on his date with Julie Kikuchi, a photographer. He takes her to dinner at a traditional Austrian restaurant, and it goes well. Cal's mind spins forward with possibilities and what he should tell her, even though he isn't sure Julie sees him as a potential mate. Cal reverses the story to 1944 to the courtship of his parents at age twenty. By 1944, Prohibition has been repealed and Lefty uses the money from his auto-erotica photos to open a proper bar and grill, also called the Zebra Room. Milton goes from a feeling of indifference toward his cousin Tessie, who is prim and measured, to a growing sense of attraction spurred by her red toenails. Milton, a Boy Scout leader and college student, has pouchy eyes and poor skin, but enough self-confidence to woo his cousin. They begin a strange and erotic courtship in which he plays his clarinet into different parts of her body; Tessie can't understand her attraction to Milton.

Desdemona notices the mounting desire between the cousins and fears the genetic repercussions. She invites Greek girls to the house on Sundays for Milton to court. Instead, he shuts himself in his room and plays his clarinet out the window, knowing Tessie can hear it at the O'Toole Boardinghouse. But Michael Antoniou, a neighborhood boy studying at the Greek Seminary in Connecticut, also begins courting Tessie. Though short, Michael is kinder than Milton, with better prospects. Desdemona encourages Tessie and Michael's relationship.

Tessie allows Michael to take her out on Saturdays. She pushes Milton away, filled with shame about the illicit clarinet-playing. Michael is awkward, but she shuts her window against Milton's desperate clarinet and gets engaged to Michael. Devastated, Milton wallows for a few days before enlisting in the Navy. Desdemona and Lefty worry for their son's safety, and Lefty spitefully reminds Milton that he never became an Eagle Scout because he can't swim.

Back in the present world of 2001, Cal calls Julie for a second date, picking her up at her studio. He admires her photography, which focuses on bleak industrial settings, an aesthetic Cal is drawn to because of his Detroit childhood. He kisses Julie, which surprises her since she thought he was gay. She admits she has a bad track record of being the last woman closeted men date before they come out. Cal just kisses her again.

Back in 1944, Milton is stationed at the Coronado Naval Base off San Diego. He quickly realizes the Navy was a mistake: sailors are injured or dying in training, and he still thinks about Tessie. He studies for admission to Annapolis, which gets him out of the repetitious maneuvers. Simultaneously in Detroit, Tessie goes to the movies, watching news reels and worrying about Milton. She writes Michael, back at Holy Cross seminary and lies about volunteering for the war effort along with the Zoe. She dreads the possibility of moving to Greece after they are married.



Milton and Desdemona also correspond. Desdemona prays to Saint Christopher to bring Milton home safely, promising her son will rebuild the church in Bithynios. Instead, Milton is reassigned to the always fatal position of signalman. At home, Tessie thinks she sees Milton in a newsreel, and realizes that she loves him and wants to marry him. She tells Desdemona, who gives her blessing, believing Milton is fated to die. Before Milton's ship reaches Japan, he gets approved for Annapolis. Milton and Tessie marry in June 1946. Crushed, Michael Antoniou courts Zoe at their wedding reception.

Analysis

Cal narrates his first date with Julie Kikuchi in the past tense, even though it happens more clearly in the present than the courtship of Tessie and Milton in 1944, which he narrates in the present tense. By emphasizing Tessie and Milton's romance Cal simultaneously deemphasizes how own, keeping his emotions in check as he tries not to get his hopes up. His future with Julie is unclear; he treats it without urgency and instead with detachment. He further demonstrates his discomfort with physical reality when he says, "real life doesn't live up to writing about it" (Page 189). Instead of vehemently pursuing Julie, he is squirreled away writing his memoir.

Tessie as a young woman contrasts sharply with her mother Lina. She dresses sensibly and thriftily. Unlike her free spirit mother, she has a sense of shame about sex, feeling dirty about her interactions with Milton and his clarinet even though nothing explicit happens between them. Tessie has a spiritual unease that she tries to quell by forcing an attraction to future priest Mike Antoniou (who is also a more ambitious, respectable and therefore "suitable" mate for a girl slotting herself into a traditional gender role), because of her "her desperate yearning to believe that there was something instead of nothing" (Page 178). She mirrors Desdemona far more than her own mother, right down to a misguided sense of God and the eternal, morality and punishment. Both women accept blame for what they foresee as Milton's impending death in the war – a personal punishment for their sins. In any case, Lina takes the traditional female gender role much more to heart than Lina ever did, proving that not every personality trait can be handed down genetically.

As Cal digs deeper into his own past he also digs deeper into Detroit's history, adding another layer of duality and identity to the city: Detroit is synonymous with the automotive industry, giving it a strong national identity. The battles between the laborers in the United Auto Workers union and management texture the city with another type of duality, though the racial tension still palpitates throughout Detroit as well. During the race riot of 1943 Lefty's sense of identity solidifies when he refuses to take a stand against blacks like his bar patrons do. In his sense of Americanism, he owns a gun and sides with the underdog, knowing he still is one.

When appraising Milton's physical attributes from the present, narrator Cal refers to "a daughter's forgiving eye" (Page 173), demonstrating how though he lives as a man, his feminine side is not completely suppressed. The duality of gender exists within him, which also explains Julie's confusion about Cal's sexual orientation. There is an irony in



his desperation to appear masculine; Cal puts so much effort into his appearance, a typically female pastime, that he radiates femininity, and therefore comes across as stereotypically homosexual.

Cal uses mythology to give his story a deeper, more universal resonance. When Milton woos Tessie he compares his father to Orpheus, a mythological figure who uses music to entice just like Milton. Yet, the reference is not without irony, since he lost his love by looking back at her as they ascended from the underworld: all Cal does is look back, obsessing about the past and how it shaped his present, and what it will mean for his future.

Because of Cal's circular storytelling style, readers already know that Zoe marries Mike Antoniou when her teenage self declares, "I'm not marrying him. You'd have to shoot me first" (Page 180). This structural device therefore creates unexpected moments of humor and irony, allowing readers to view the past with perspective, just as Cal does. Similarly, it allows him to create strange or amusing juxtapositions, posing the young and inept sailor Milton next to failed 1988 Presidential candidate (and fellow Greek-American) Michael Dukakis awkwardly poking out of a tank.

Similarly, Cal pulls from the techniques of Greek drama that he emulates hand-in-hand with mythology, and often uses it with a self-aware tongue-in-cheek. He proclaims, "Every Greek drama needs a deus ex machina" (Page 196) – an unexpected, unsolicited savior – and Milton is saved from certain death by his acceptance to Annapolis. The deus ex machina turns a tragedy to a comedy, and Cal self-consciously plays on that comedy by calling attention to it. But he foreshadows the return to tragedy before the novel ends when he claims that Milton's failure to rebuild the Bithynios church to thank this deus ex machina (in Desdemona's eyes, St. Christopher, to whom she promised this payment) will have "disastrous effects."

Milton's life expectancy as a signalman is pegged at 38 seconds, hearkening back to the precisely timed seconds in which tasks were completed when Lefty worked on the Ford assembly line. Eugenides uses this connection to create a metaphor of Milton's expendable life in the war as a mere extension of American industrial/manufacturing culture.

Vocabulary

Theosophy, dexterous, ardor, atone, coerce, consumptive, doleful, lubricity, regurgitate, itinerary, mitigate, fissure, benediction, benevolent.



Ex Ovo Omnia

Summary

After graduating from Annapolis in 1949, Milton and Tessie are stationed in Pearl Harbor. It is in the same year when Zoe marries Father Mike, having found no better prospects. In 1951, Milton and Tessie move to Norfolk, Virginia. Milton serves in the Korean War from 1951-3, and the military life instills in him discipline and xenophobia. Chapter Eleven is born in March of 1954, and Desdemona dreams of retiring to New Smyrna Beach in Florida.

In 1956, Milton leaves the military and moves back to Detroit with his family to renovate Lefty's shabby bar into a Greek-American diner, though the neighborhood is deteriorating. As the diner thrives, Milton moves Tessie and Chapter Eleven to a new middle class suburb called Indian Village. Lina has moved to the southwest United States with a woman named Mrs. Evelyn Watson whom she met at a Theosophical Society meeting

Milton slowly pushes Lefty, only 54 years old and still fit, out of the business and Lefty is drawn to a shop called Rubsamen Medical Supply, a front for a gambling establishment. For two years he takes money from the diner and his savings account, playing statistical probabilities and numbers from Desdemona's dream book. One day he tries to withdraw money only to discover his savings account is gone. Desdemona's dreams of Florida are destroyed, and they move into Milton and Tessie's attic. Though Desdemona complains of the small space, being high in the house reminds her of her mountain home in Bithynios.

The story returns to where it began, which is during the Greek Easter of 1959 when Cal is conceived. While downstairs the family plays a traditional game with red dyed eggs, smashing them together to see whose will crack and whose will not. The mutated fifth chromosome that has been recessive in the family's genes for 250 years is about to come out of dormancy.

Analysis

Cal explains his chapter title to his readers: "Everything comes out of an egg" (Page 198), which comes from *Metamorphoses* by Ovid. Though Latin and not Greek, this invocation of Ovid brings to mind the important theme of rebirth: Cal's from girl to boy, and his family's greater transformation from Greek to American, and resonates with all the interconnections within his own family's history: it is all possible to see the texture of this interweaving because they are all born of one thing (literally, one genetic pool).

In his all-encompassing, circular storytelling, just as Milton reveals he will restyle the Zebra Room as a diner, Cal also reveals that Milton will eventually own an empire of popular hot dog stands, rather than letting that future event develop in a linear, cause-



and-effect structure that builds suspense toward the achievement or failure of goals. With this simultaneous revelation, Cal refocuses his readers' attention on his personal priority: family dynamics and tensions rather than external benchmarks of success. Middlesex is not plot-driven in a traditional sense, moving from one event to another. Instead, it unspools like several balls of yarn woven together into a cohesive whole. Dr. Philobosian's integrated story of the Preformationsists and silkworms acts as a metaphor for this circular style: Cal's life is about chance and fate, not cause-and-effect plot (though ironically, Cal spends a lot of time seeking the cause-and-effect that lead to his birth as a hermaphrodite). Cal also uses the Preformation theories to explain his own omniscient narration: if all humanity has existed since creation, why wouldn't he know everything that has occurred since then?

The novel literally comes full circle at the end of this chapter: readers arrive back at the events of the first chapter: Cal's conception on Easter Sunday, told in the present tense as egg and sperm come together – the most urgent and important event of the novel. As the sperm travel to their destination, Cal describes, “a long white silken thread spinning itself out. The thread began on a day two hundred and fifty years ago, when the biology gods, for their own amusement, monkeyed with a gene on a baby's fifth chromosome” (Page 210). Readers should note the use once again of this thread metaphor, the ultimate symbol of connection, recurring from Desdemona's silkworms and the yarn unspooling on the ship from Athens to America. It creates a powerful and resonant image for the readers.

Milton's years in the military entrench him in an American identity. Rather than opening his mind to foreign cultures, his Navy travels make him xenophobic and bigoted against foreigners. He becomes conservative and Republican, against the East Coast and liberalism. Milton revels in being an “average” American; yet, his social circle in Detroit remains overwhelmingly Greek. Even within an attitude of American isolationism, he isolates himself.

Milton and Lefty's protracted discussion of the Zebra Room's three insurance policies and decision to keep them foreshadows a need for those policies. A disaster is likely to strike the Zebra Room. The rebirth of the establishment results in Hercules Hot Dogs.

As one element of the postmodern structure of the novel, Cal borrows from other genres to delineate the passage of time; On page 203, he briefly outlines a “stock capitalist montage” creating a series of images with a cinematic quantity. Readers can relate to this device from their exposure to film.

Once the diner is successful, Milton moves the family to “Indian Village” – a neighborhood that is a perfect metaphor for the melting pot of America itself: some of the streets, rather than having Native American names, have been conquered by the names of famous white men. The architecture is a cultural blend (of acceptable Western European design). It is the ultimate suburb of the American Dream.

Vocabulary

Provenance, arcana, homunculus, lenticular, austere, diminutive, assiduous, depredation, augur, permutation.



Home Movies - OPA!

Summary

With failing vision at the age of seventy-four, Dr. Philobosian delivers Calliope. During an unexpected moment of flirtation with the assisting nurse, he only gives Calliope a cursory examination. He does not probe her superficially normal genitalia. Nor do Tessie or Milton as they bathe and diaper the baby. Sex remains shrouded in shame for the family. Baby Callie pees on Father Mike during her baptism (a sacrament performed at Desdemona's insistence) and no one except Chapter Eleven wonders about the logistics of the urine's arc. Desdemona considers everything about Callie – from her incorrect gender prediction to the baptismal peeing – as a bad omen. However, Desdemona cannot help but fall in love with the baby that looks so much like herself.

Desdemona is also disappointed when Lefty survives the stroke he had the same day that Callie is born. She thought his premature death was the punishment she had long awaited for their sin. Except for losing his speech, he recovers and bonds with his granddaughter. The first seven years of Cal's life are recorded in Milton's home movies that show a little girl, obsessively dressed in pink by Tessie. Cal is happily playing with dolls. By 1967, the diner is failing as the neighborhood becomes poorer and blacker, fueling Milton's racism. Lefty takes Calliope to the diner once a week, and Cal befriends a black law student and activist, Marius W. C. Grimes, who preaches on the corner near the diner. She is offended when Marius tells her Milton is racist, but she starts to see the signs herself. When Milton catches Cal talking to Marius, he orders her to stop associating with him, and Lefty stops bringing her to the diner.

In 2001, Cal takes Julie away for a weekend to Usedom, an island in the Baltic. They sleep in separate rooms. Cal worries if he is being a gentleman or a coward. He feels a strong sense of connection with Julie, but he still does not press the issue of intimacy.

On July 23, 1967, several months after Milton forbids Callie from talking to Grimes, race riots break out in Detroit. The phone rings in the middle of the night and Callie answers, relaying the message that the city's blacks are burning and looting. Milton grabs the gun he sleeps with under his pillow while Tessie takes the children and a suitcase of food to the attic. They spend three days watching Detroit burn on Lefty and Desdemona's small TV, while Milton keeps vigil at the diner. Snipers randomly shoot people throughout the city and businesses are destroyed.

Finally, President Lyndon Johnson sends in federal troops and tanks to end the violence. Simultaneously, seven-year-old Callie decides to go to the diner to rescue her father, sneaking out of the house in the pre-dawn morning. She follows the tanks from the east side of the city to the west. Meanwhile, sleep-deprived, Milton can barely function at the diner. He snaps to alertness when someone rattles the door, but it is only Morrison, a black man who lives across the street, wanting cigarettes. Milton is disgusted, but is horrified a few minutes later when the tanks roll in and open fire killing



Morrison as he lights a cigarette. Soon the gunfire stops and the tanks roll on. Outside, a terrified Callie watches as a man who looks like Marius Grimes throws a Molotov cocktail through the diner window, shouting “Opa!”

Inside the diner, Milton realizes that letting the diner burn will mean more in insurance claims than it is really worth; he can potentially collect \$500,000 from Lefty’s three policies. He retreats out the back door and finds Callie. Shocked to see her, he hugs her and takes her home.

Analysis

Even from birth, Cal is hyper aware as a narrator of gender; as a baby girl she feels the “weight of female suffering” in the hospital around her, and Cal pinpoints Dr. Philobosian’s failure to notice his hermaphroditic genitalia as the result of “chance and sex” – Cal explicitly points out the themes of his story rather than allowing the reader to tease them out, possibly because he himself is trying to piece them together for himself.

He further illuminates another major theme when he says, “Emotions, in my experience, aren’t covered by single words. I don’t believe in “sadness,” “joy,” or “regret.” Maybe the best proof that the language is patriarchal is that it oversimplifies feeling. I’d like to have at my disposal complicated hybrid emotions” (Page 217). Feelings have duality: they can move in opposite directions at the same time, and have the inherent contradiction of a paradox. These “hybrid emotions” are a mirror for all the other forms of duality in the novel: Cal’s ambiguous gender, the Stephanides’ conflicted national loyalty, Detroit’s racial conflict, even Tessie’s desire to believe in something bigger but her inability to do so. All these instances represent the fragile tension of the human condition. Cal’s circular narrative style underscores the idea that life is rarely black and white, moving straight from point A to point B.

As part of that shift in time and place, Cal casually drops in a brief description of another date with Julie in the present to make a point of tying together his physical presence from birth to the present. Yet, the very nonchalant brevity with which he mentions it serves to underscore how important it is to him. After describing himself as a baby, Cal asks his reader, “Can you see me? All of me? Probably not. No one ever has” (Page 218). There is an interesting irony in his confrontational style. Of course the reader cannot literally see him, having only words to build a mental image; but, even those who have met him in reality, including Julie, have not seen everything that he is.

One characteristic of postmodern literature is “intertextuality,” in which a writer makes references to noted literary works. As readers will have already noted, Cal alludes to Greek mythology and Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* frequently, and in the chapter dealing with Cal’s birth he mentions Kafka, who wrote a story called “The Metamorphosis.” Thematically the link is clear: Cal pays homage to the great writers who came before him and dealt with transformation and rebirth into a new form. On a humorous note, Cal the narrator makes the ultimate postmodern self-referential reference, describing how Milton’s eye often appears in the middle of familial home movies while he changes the



camera's film: "A postmodern touch in our domestic cinema, pointing up artifice, calling attention to mechanics. (And bequeathing me my aesthetic)" (Page 225). Milton's "eye" inserts itself into the family narrative as unobtrusively as Cal's "I." Later in the chapter, Cal creates a strong referential image by describing the inner workings of Milton's mind as going "behind the camera."

Another example of this intertextuality comes with Cal's reference to Chekhov and his dramatic rule that a gun seen in Act I must go off by Act III. Cal presents his father's gun and foreshadows an impending explosion, but the explicit "winking" of his reference leaves the reader to interpret whether the gun might be a metaphor for something else.

Cal takes the time to describe the construction of the Assumption Greek Orthodox church where baby Callie is baptized. The shaky foundation on which the church was built by an embezzling contractor serves as a metaphor for Callie's baptism: the baby is "christened" with a name that is an inadvertent lie, assigning her the wrong gender. Furthermore, Cal's faith itself seems shaky; his relationship with a higher power, like Tessie's, seems ambivalent at best. How could it be otherwise when it is learned from Tessie, who only bothers to think about God when things go badly and she needs help, such as during the terror of the race riots, when she listens to Desdemona pray and, "tries as usual to dispel her doubts and truly believe" (Page 241).

Similarly, Desdemona presents faith to Callie in a poor light, seeing Callie's gender (against her prediction) and baptismal peeing as bad omens, though not being baptized was also inviting celestial wrath. Desdemona's reaction to Lefty's stroke is not sadness, but relief, a hope that he is dead and her pound of flesh paid to the Lord through him. Her first interpretation of the Detroit race riots is as a personal punishment on Milton for failing to repay St. Christopher for helping him survive the war. (In this way Desdemona has a masculine thought process, seeing a direct connection between cause and effect constantly around her.) Callie is brought into a world where the women are constantly on the lookout for signs of impending punishment, negative messages from God about what is wrong with them.

While Callie is submerged in the baptismal font, the "sides of [her] neck tingled in the place where humans once had gills" (Page 221). With this reference to ancient evolution, Cal foreshadows his future evolution, adapting from life as a girl to that of a man. In another small instance of foreshadowing, only Chapter Eleven notices how far Callie's urine arc travels to hit Father Mike in the face during the baptism, a feat which should be impossible from a physics and physically female position. Chapter Eleven quietly pays attention to Callie in ways the rest of the Stephanides clan does not. His thoughtfulness paves the way for an easier transition when Callie becomes Cal.

Cal's continued ignorance about her own genitalia, which no one probes too closely, nor does anyone talk to her about, indicates the deep-rooted familial shame about all matters relating to sexuality, emphasized by the fact that the Stephanides don't even have a euphemistic phrase to talk about female genitals. In a less repressed family (with a perhaps more repressed doctor, who wasn't distracted by the sexuality of his nurse during his initial examination of the baby) Cal's entire life might have been different, his



gender identity discovered at a much younger age. When Cal observes a nude beach with Julie in the present, he still does not feel comfortable enough with his body to parade it as others, be they fat or old. It is no wonder Cal feels the hand of fate playing with the threads of his life.

Readers should note that as Cal names all the Stephanides' friends, they are exclusively Greek. Despite living in America, these Greek-Americans isolate themselves among people with the same ethnic and cultural background. They have not quite melted into America's pot yet. Tessie and Milton's furniture serves as a metaphor for their continued status as outsiders: it alludes to American's version of mythology (Page 235), the founding fathers. But each piece is a reproduction or knock-off; none of the furniture has any genuine period value. During the riots, a young Callie mimics the racist views of her parents, demonstrating how non-genetic personality traits can be passed from one generation to the next. Yet, Callie initially "befriends" black activist Marcus Grimes, making one of the first steps toward evolving outside of the family's insular circle and fully assimilating into American culture.

Besides the Ovid and Kafka references that illustrate the cyclical nature of life and narrative, the burning of Detroit during the 1967 riots reminds Desdemona of Smyrna; her own life circles back on her. On a less serious note, Cal describes the "vintage" decorating scheme of the Zebra Room diner, pointing out how everything old is new again. Life wraps back around on itself.

Finally, after the riots end and the smoke begin to clear, Detroit raises its city flag, emblazoned with a phoenix, a mythological creature that rises from its own ashes after burning. The phoenix is a metaphor for rebirth. It encapsulates the intertwining stories of Cal and the city of Detroit itself.

Vocabulary

Cretinous, sacral, berate, ethereal, inadvertent, ominous, translucent, domicile, sexagenarian, latent, rudimentary, allusion, avert, oblique, androgen.



Middlesex - The Mediterranean Diet

Summary

Ironically, the riots pull the Stephanides' clan back from the brink of bankruptcy. Milton uses the insurance payout to buy a 1967 Cadillac Fleetwood, the first in a succession of new cars that mirrors the changing times and Cal's internal life. Next, Milton buys a house in the upscale suburban neighborhood of Grosse Pointe, despite the endeavors of the real estate agents to keep out non-WASPs. He pays cash for an unsellable, modern house that has a separate bath house and guest house for Lefty and Desdemona.

Lefty cleans the glass walls of the new house and takes walks with Callie, but he has an undetected stroke and his sense of time and space start to come apart. Callie befriends a pale blonde girl named Clementine Stark, who teaches Callie to kiss, stirring feelings that Callie doesn't understand. The little girls have an intense physical encounter playing in the bathhouse, but their joy turns to shame when they discover Lefty slumped on the floor. An ambulance rushes him to the hospital, and Callie blames herself for his mental deterioration. At the same time Clementine's father has a heart attack and her mother moves them away.

For three years Lefty loses chunks of time, slowly forgetting things as he rewinds to earlier pieces of his history. Eventually, Lefty begins referring to Desdemona as his sister. Horrified, she believes their secret is out, but the family merely sees it as a symptom of his addled mind. He dies in the winter of 1970. Desdemona goes home from the funeral and gets into bed, where she stays for the next ten years, even though a series of doctors tell her she is fine. Not even Father Mike or Tessie's guilt trips can rouse Desdemona. She waits patiently to die, planning her own funeral – casket, mortician, and all – while Tessie and Callie care for her.

In 2001, Julie and Cal have had a lovely weekend in Pomerania – they visit former East German resort Herringsdorf and imagine a future together restoring a crumbling mansion. But as Cal gets closer to having to reveal his secret, he becomes distant, and when he returns to Berlin he does not call or return Julie's calls. He returns to thoughts of his past, rather than his future.

In the early months of 1971, Milton invests the rest of his insurance money in a new brand, the Hercules Hot Dogs food stands. He starts at three malls in Michigan and slowly expands down the highway to Florida. Chapter Eleven, a nerdy experimenter, discovers a way to make the hot dogs flex. The hot dog stands, though low brow, make Milton rich. While Chapter Eleven revels in his braininess, the beautiful Callie spends her childhood getting attention from male classmates and her father's old Greek friends. By age eleven Callie notices she is not filling out like other girls her age, or getting her period – though she hardly knows what that is, since neither Tessie nor Dr. Philobosian



will discuss sexuality with her. As sixth grade progresses, Callie stops receiving attention from boys, and even Tessie teases her that she doesn't need a bra.

Sourmelina's partner, Mrs. Watson, dies and Lina moves back north in February, 1972, more fully American than any of the Stephanides. Though she and Desdemona are near the same age, Lina dyes her hair and drives a sporty car, while Desdemona has a laundry list of ailments. One doctor, a German named Muller, mistakenly thinks Desdemona is ninety-one instead of seventy-one. He tries to use her as proof that the Mediterranean diet promotes health and longevity. Callie decides that Mediterranean cuisine is similarly stunting her advancement into puberty. She starts refusing to eat. Amidst all the small dramas of family life, Milton is focused on a Supreme Court judge's ruling to desegregate Detroit schools by sending suburban kids back into the city for school.

Analysis

Continuing with the theme of simultaneous and paradoxical emotions, the race riots are terrible for Detroit, but good for the Stephanides' clan. The riots give them a chance to start over outside of the city's blight. Thematically it dovetails with Milton's desire for upward mobility juxtaposed with his personal bigotry. Ironically, the way the upper class Protestant families of the Grosse Pointe suburb feel about "ethnic" southern and eastern Europeans like the Stephanides mimics Milton's entrenched hatred of Detroit's black. Milton has a go at self-identification. He sees himself as a millionaire. He exploits his cultural heritage by dabbling in mythology and Greek architecture to build his chain of hot dog stands. He hopes to mimic McDonald's easily identifiable golden arches. His lofty ambition rests on the lowest food on the American food chain, the hot dog. His modern house and endless stream of Cadillacs signify that he has achieved the American Dream.

It is after Lefty's death that in a satirical play on the theme of identity, Desdemona plans all the details for her own funeral. Even though she is not actually sick, she identifies herself as a dying, soon-to-be immigrant to heaven. She has many years yet to live.

The description of the staircase in the house of Middlesex has a lovely, metaphorical quality: "Stairs represented a teleological view of the universe, of one thing leading to another, whereas now everyone knew that one thing didn't lead to another but often nowhere at all. So neither did our stairs. Oh, they went up, eventually. They took the persistent climber to the second floor, but on the way they took him lots of other places as well" (Page 258-9). This wryly applies to Cal's storytelling style, meandering from incident to incident, back and forth in time, with no linear cause-and-effect structure. Resolution may not always be possible, but parts of life are often left dangling, inexplicable and unfinished.

Cal relates some events instantly in their entirety. As soon as readers meet Clementine Stark, they learn her father's sudden death will be soon. Readers see the beginning and end of her space in Cal's life simultaneously, and Cal points out something important



about his all-encompassing storytelling technique: memory has the habit of infusing all chronological events in a series with the most recent. All of Cal's memories of Clementine are "tinged with a blue wash of misfortune that hadn't quite befallen her at the time" (Page 263). To try and tell a narrative from the past in a linear structure from a point in the present is somewhat disingenuous; the narrator always knows what's coming next, all suspense has been deflated. To create a sense of tension may be tantamount to deception. Memory exists out of time; memories all exist as once. Callie's nonstop chattering as a little girl leads Milton to make a joke about "circular breathing," a musicians' technique of breathing in through the nose simultaneously to pushing air out through the mouth into an instrument. This subtle joke gives one more metaphorical layer to Cal's storytelling style: it surrounds people and events from every angle simultaneously.

Keen readers will have noticed by now that Lefty does not attend church regularly with Desdemona, but his feelings on religion are not made clear until he approaches death. He too has an estranged relationship with God, but has maintained faith in his own immortal soul. When staring death in the face, Lefty's faith fails him; he reverts to the expendable feeling of his days on the assembly line. His body is little more than a replaceable cog in the machinery of life, and once used up, there will be nothing left that will contain Lefty's essential identity.

Cal uses present tense to tell about several moments in this section. Examples include Lefty's final moments of lucidity before the stroke that sends him backward in time in a spiral of dementia and Callie and Clementine's kissing and erotic play in the pool. Given Lefty's diminished view of the soul, it is little wonder some of his last coherent thoughts are recorded with the urgency of the present moment. Callie's first sexual experience, bound up in feelings of personal goodness/rightness yet a foreboding sense of the moment's impropriety juxtaposed with a guilty unease about Lefty's decline, make it one of the most pivotal moments of her childhood. Sexuality and shame are tied together in an entirely new way. Similarly, Lefty's receding into the past in a painfully poignant way brings the past into the present. It mirrors Cal's literary style. Callie's present tense moment in math class, when she realizes that her body is not developing as those of her peers, creates the sense of urgency surrounding that need to fit in. At age twelve, Callie is in a rush to move her present tense into the future. Yet, she finds her body remaining stubbornly still.

Cal cannot penetrate Desdemona's thoughts after Lefty is buried. This is one of the few times throughout the narrative when Cal's omniscience fails. Perhaps, this is making the point that there are certain situations that are too complex and personal for anyone who has not experienced them to untangle.

In the meantime, Cal occasionally can't help but let his own present events spill forth onto the page. As he describes Desdemona's self-imposed bed-ridden state, he abruptly interrupts himself in a manner mimicking spoken conversation to update readers on his status with Julie (the status being that it is essentially over.) He doesn't detail how he feels about ending this budding romance, but the urgency with which he interrupts himself to relay the incidents – yet relaying them in the definitively past tense



reveals a great deal about his roiling emotional state. Cal's narrative of his relationship with Julie is one of the only story arcs told in a strictly linear style, unfolding as it happens in the present, giving Cal little time to reflect upon and analyze it.

There is an amusing irony in one detail of Callie's 1972 annual physical with Dr. Philobosian. The doctor is in his eighties. In his waiting room are copies of the children's magazine Highlights that are almost as old. Callie herself did all the puzzles inside when she was a much younger child. Cal subtly points out the puzzle which asks children: "Can you find these?" – the question Dr. Philobosian has answered incorrectly for twelve years of examining Callie and failing to notice her double genitalia. Sex and physical realities remain a topic shrouded in mystery and shame even as Callie approaches puberty, the time when she most needs that information.

Vocabulary

Eccentric, disavowal, implacable, phosphorescent, teleological, traipse, undulate, dissolution, ruse, clarity, trepidation, reprimand.



The Wolverette - Waxing Lyrical

Summary

Since there is a threat of busing, Milton sends Callie to a prep school called Baker. As a seventh grader in 1972, she attends Inglis School for Girls. Callie does not quite fit in. She is an “ethnic girl” among the WASPs descended from the Mayflower and auto empires. She is not athletic, as an account of a day playing goalie for the field hockey team attests, and her body still has not matured. She is short and flat. She wears braces, and her nose begins to arch. She dreads showering in the girls’ locker room with her more developed classmates, instead changing without getting naked and faking a shower by wetting her hair in the water fountain.

Callie befriends the other ethnic girls who bought their way into the school. Chapter Eleven avoids getting drafted into the Vietnam War and begins studying engineering in Ann Arbor. Without him around, Callie feels her parents’ emotions more acutely. Her father continues his conservative attitude and disdain for Vietnam’s mismanagement, while her mother wards off a sense of purposelessness with arts and crafts. Milton and Tessie quickly abandon a self-improvement project to read the Great Books series, but Callie dreams of writing her own classic.

In January of seventh grade, Callie’s growth spurt finally hits: she grows several inches sprouts hair like her classmates, though her breasts remain nonexistent. Though she is awkward looking, the androgyny of the early 1970s works to Callie’s advantage, and girls are subconsciously attracted to her though she is not overtly masculine. She grows out her hair until it is long and unmanageable, giving the uncomfortable girl something to hide behind. In the fall of 1973, a local salon owner and fellow churchgoer, Sophie Sassoon, notices that Callie has a mustache and invites her to get waxed at the Golden Fleece salon. Callie is not alarmed by the mustache, having expected it because of her Greek genes. The women in her family all battle unwanted hair.

Chapter Eleven comes home for Christmas in his sophomore year as a hippie, with long hair, bell bottoms, and guitar in tow. For the first time in their lives, he beats Milton at ping pong. He has switched his major to anthropology and has a girlfriend, Meg Zemka, who majors in political science. Chapter Eleven tries to give Callie facts about sex, but Callie is too embarrassed to discuss it. The “Marxist”, Meg Zemka, antagonizes Milton’s capitalist lifestyle. Chapter Eleven agrees with Meg about despising his parents’ constant pursuit of money. Milton suggests that the family take a summer trip to Bithynios, hoping to reinstate in Chapter Eleven a sense of his heritage. But, Chapter Eleven rejects the idea. He fights with his parents and leaves in a fury on his motorcycle on New Year’s Eve.



Analysis

As if to prove the point that gender is not all one thing or all another, Callie, destined to become a man, does not show any interest in or aptitude for the traditionally masculine pursuit of athletics. When he passes prostitutes in Berlin as an adult, he doesn't think of them as sexual objects but sympathizes with their plight from a feminist perspective. Yet, Eugenides seems to make the point that gender identity is certainly partly innate/ It is not learned entirely from a child's nurturing environment. By illustrating how Callie's female classmates gravitate toward her, the author proposes that they are subconsciously attracted to her inherent masculine identity.

The problems most borderline pubescent girls face are exponentially greater for Callie. She faces an awkward stage with her undeveloped body that she can't begin to understand. By attending an all-girls, affluent WASP school, Callie's status as an "outsider" is further exacerbated by her ethnicity. Though her family has lived in America for fifty years, there is still some unease about her identification as an American. Unable to control her identity on any level (she cannot make herself a WASP, nor make her body change the way her classmates do), the only control Callie has is of her hair, which she grows out as a defense mechanism, a way to hide from the judgment of others. Ironically, her stubbornly long hair ties her more closely to her immigrant past, mimicking Desdemona's behavior. It makes her ethnic roots stand out more.

Cal invokes the Muses to signal the universality of body hair removal, a ritual enacted by generations of Greek women. By using the formal language of epic poetry, he humorously suggests the epic nature of this battle against unwanted hair. He further creates a subtle dynamic of immigrant interrelations: the salon's waxer, Helga, is a Hungarian immigrant clearly on a lower social rung than the Greek women she services. Yet Helga as the most enlightened, proto-feminist view of any of them, chiding the Greek women for inflicting pain on themselves for the sake of a man.

In addition to Greek mythology, other mythologies permeate the story. There is the obvious mythology of the American Dream and the self-made man, which Milton fully buys into. Even the prestigious Baker and Inglis School has its own mythology, including that its two founding women lived chastely in separate rooms. Being openly lesbian in the early twentieth century would have been nearly impossible. That fact that their sexual orientation must still be hidden sixty years later shows the pervasive problem of shame and sexuality that is not unique to Callie.

On Page 296, readers get a glimpse of how the adult Cal, the grandchild of immigrants and the child of Depression babies, has in some ways rejected the values of his ancestors. He has not sustained Milton's obsessive desire to get rich quick or to assimilate seamlessly into WASP society (even as a girl child. Cal feels an ambivalence toward the upper echelon of American society, a duality of emotions about her WASP classmates. She feels inferior, less beautiful, less entitled, and less confident. At the same time, she also realizes that she is smarter and has more complex emotions. The adult Cal puts a premium on the value of the written word; specifically on his own



unique story. Despite the self-doubt and lack of confidence, Cal does believe in the power of his history and his ability to tell it in a compelling way, whether or not it makes him financially rich. The seeds of this passion are sown during Cal's youth, reflected in Callie's burning desire to write a "Great Book." While living abroad, Cal's priorities have shifted from the generations before him. Cal is less concerned about seeming American than seeming masculine, and, perhaps, simply human in the best sense.

In this section, describing the prepubescent Callie, narrator Cal speaks about "Calliope" more formally in the third person. This more distant narrative device highlights exactly that: Cal cannot always identify with the emotional life of his younger, female self – he feels distant from that part of his life and self.

Away at college, Chapter Eleven has undergone something of his own rebirth. From a nerdy, science-oriented teen he has become a people-empathizing, open-minded hippie. He takes drugs and drops his engineering major, disappointing the hopes of every immigrant parent that their children will rise higher than they have. Chapter Eleven, raised in an insular world of Greek-Americans, has seen more of the world by attending a university with students from all over. He rebels against his parents' money-oriented values, failing to appreciate Milton's capitalist efforts have all had the aim of providing a better life for his children. Chapter Eleven rejects his immigrant roots and taps into the American zeitgeist of the late 1960s and early 1970s: pacifist, experimental, anti-materialist. As with every generation, he pushes back against his parents in order to create a sense of identity for himself.

As when he noticed the impressive and nearly impossible arc of Callie's baptismal pee, Chapter Eleven continues to notice Callie in ways the rest of the family ignores. He is the only person who tries to give her a positive perspective on her burgeoning sexuality, trying to have an open and frank conversation with her about sex. Unfortunately, her sex shame has already been so deeply ingrained from Tessie and Dr. Philobosian's silence on the subject that it is too late to see her body in a healthy light.

Vocabulary

Duress, comportment, amiable, nebulous, inguinal, wariness, sojourn, divergent, fecundity, porous, insouciant, tenacity, emanate, inert, expendable, resonant.



The Obscure Object - Tiresias in Love

Summary

As the adult Cal ruminates on the solitary nature of writing and how it suits his present inability to pursue intimacy, he fast-forwards his story briefly to his college years, describing a time when he was more open to close relationships with others: he had a girlfriend, Olivia, who had been brutally assaulted at age thirteen. Both emotionally stunted, they gently initiated each other into intimacy. But after college he traveled and joined the Foreign Service so he would never be anywhere long enough to develop lasting relationships. Though he once proposed to an unlikely girl in Brussels who didn't mind his physical differences, she ran off with someone else.

The narrative returns to the spring of Callie's eighth grade year at Baker and Inglis as her parents recover from Chapter Eleven's Christmas outburst. Callie takes an advanced English class with an inspiring teacher named Mr. da Silva, who lives more in poems than reality. One day Mr. da Silva's teaching is interrupted when an apathetic student is sent to join the class. She is one of the Charm Bracelet girls, the rich and WASP cliché that runs the school. Callie develops an immediate crush on the redheaded beauty, despite her lack of intellectual ambition. Adult Cal refers to her only as the Obscure Object, an elusive reference to a 1977 Spanish surrealist film.

Callie does not think much about her feelings; strong emotions often develop between girls in a single sex school. But she watches the Obscure Object from a distance and wonders if she (Callie) is the same as other girls; she senses that her genitalia might not be what everyone else has; she still hasn't gotten her period, much to Tessie's chagrin. She frequently hides in the school's ancient marble bathroom, shielding herself from anyone discovering she is different.

In late spring Mr. da Silva organizes the eighth graders to perform a Greek drama in the field hockey stadium. After a surprisingly compelling cold read in class one day, he casts the Obscure Object in the lead role as Antigone. Callie, cast as Tiresias, immediately volunteers to help the Obscure Object memorize her lines. At the Object's house, the redhead likes to act like an adult, smoking and taking antacids. But as she and Callie spend time together, she starts to act her age and genuinely enjoys Callie's company. On performance day, the girls wait nervously backstage. Callie tries to encourage the Object, who snaps at her, deflating Callie. During the first scene between Antigone and Ismene, the girl playing Ismene, Maxine Grossinger, has an aneurysm and dies on stage, sending the Object fleeing into Callie's arms, to her own perverse joy.

In the summer of 1974, a few weeks after Maxine dies, Tessie, worried that Callie still hasn't gotten her period, makes an appointment for her daughter to see a gynecologist, Dr. Bauer. Callie's new best friend the Obscure Object heightens Callie's fears with gynecological horror stories. Callie and the Obscure Object spend their days at the Grosse Pointe Club's pool, where. Callie meets the Object's older brother, Jerome, who



seems attracted to Callie despite her boyish appearance. Callie is depressed that she can't accompany the Object to her family's summer house in Petoskey because her own parents are taking her to Bithynios to rebuild the church in long overdue payment to St. Christopher.

The girls spend a great deal of time together before they each head to vacation. Callie frequently spends the night, giving the Object massages and sleeping with her in bed. The Object tries to make Callie feel comfortable enough to undress in front of her, but Callie feels strange about her body. She worries about the doctor appointment and starts going to church again with her mother to pray for her period while Tessie prays for Chapter Eleven, who has dropped out of college and moved north to "live off the land."

On July 20, 1974, Turkey attacks Cypress, and Callie and the Object go to a house party. Callie is shocked when the Object encourages the attentions of Rex Reese, a high schooler whose drunk driving caused his girlfriend's death. Callie evades Jerome's flirtations and pulls the Object away from Rex. The Object thinks their friendship is getting too intense and is glad Callie is leaving. The next morning in church, Callie fakes cramps so her mother will take her home, and charts out a fake schedule for her period, thus avoiding the gynecologist. When they get home from church, the house is full of Milton's Greek friends, all shocked at the Turkish invasion of Greece. The family trip to Turkey cancelled, Callie gleefully calls the Object and tells her she can travel to Petoskey after all.

Analysis

Cal opens this section with a perplexingly self-reflexive question: is the act of writing his story more for himself or for an audience? Is he a coward to sit alone and write rather than interact with people? i.e., live life rather than talk about it?

As his tale marches inevitably toward that moment he discovers the true nature of his body, Cal relates some stories from the time between transitioning into a man and the present forty-one year old living in 2001: tales of his failed romances and his travels to avoid failed romances. Despite the circular nature of the narrative, despite the fact that readers know that pivotal moment of rebirth from woman to man is coming, Cal uses some literary tricks, telling these tangential stories, to delay that gratification and build a kind of suspense for his audience.

Callie meets the Obscure Object in the spring of eighth grade, which is a metaphorically significant time of year. Spring is the season of rebirth, as the world transforms itself with reviving life and new growth. With the introduction of the Obscure Object into her reality, Callie is set inexorably on the path that will see her reborn as a man. This metaphor is extended by Callie's referral to her genitalia as a "crocus," a blooming Mediterranean flower.

Ironically, Callie's English teacher is Brazilian by birth. Mr. da Silva is an example of a successful immigrant story, type: "the Latin details of his childhood...had been erased



by a North American education and a love of the European novel” (Page 321). Yet, this success comes at a high price: Mr. da Silva has completely renounced his roots. His passions lie in the socially acceptable realm of Europe. His sense of identity may be entirely American but only because he has given up everything Brazilian about himself. Assimilation may be possible for immigrants, but tension and disconnection will arise if they, like the Stephanides, try to hold on to pieces of their native culture, including language, religion, and traditional ceremonies. On a deeply subconscious level, Callie’s attraction to the WASP-y Obscure Object, her desperation to spend time with her and fit in, may be an effort to assimilate more fully into an American culture she still feels removed from.

In another example of the circular structure of time and the simultaneous existence of layers of memory, Cal’s nickname for his crush, “The Obscure Object,” refers to a Spanish surrealist film that didn’t exist until three years after the last time Cal saw the Object, and that he himself didn’t view for several years after that. But the film made him think of the girl, and they are now inextricably linked in his mind, even though objectively they have no association.

Keen readers will remind themselves of the irony of Callie’s casting as Tiresias in the Greek tragedy *Antigone*: Tiresias was born a man but changed into a woman by the wrath of the gods, and only later in life was he transformed back into a man. In addition he was blind, just as Callie and her family are blind to her gender reality.

Just as the Detroit race riots ironically led to great financial gain for the Stephanides, so too is Callie overcome with the duality of emotion when her classmate Maxine Grossinger dies on stage: this truly tragic moment during a fake Greek tragedy turns into the best moment of Callie’s life when the Obscure Object seeks comfort in Callie’s arms.

As a fourteen year old, Callie chafes at the idea of spending the summer in remote Turkey; her familial history in Bithynios has nothing to do with her present budding relationship with the Obscure Object. Of course, this is a matter of perspective: the adult Cal recognizes how pivotal Bithynios is to his present. Had Lefty and Desdemona not been forced to flee, they would not have given in to their passion for each other; the mutated chromosome that led to his unique physical state would have stayed dormant and Cal himself would not exist. Cal, layering context from a historical perspective tells readers that a battle is about to break out between Turkey and Greece, though that is still a future development for early-summer Callie. By telling readers in advance of it happening, Cal hints that Callie will not be spending her summer in Bithynios after all; fate, in the role of an international skirmish a continent away, is intervening to get Callie to the proper moment of physical self-revelation. Finding out about the war later in the chapter creates a full circle feeling for readers.

Cal describes the furniture in the Object’s house as “impressively old, heavy, and sent out signals of permanence and settled judgment” (Page 341). This detail is small but symbolically important, as keen readers will remember the description of the Stephanides furniture as faux-colonial knock-offs. The Stephanides cannot escape their



immigrant heritage; they cannot buy their way into an authentic American history. The tension between identification as American and “other” has not diminished over time.

In another example of the greater argument that gender is inherent not learned, young Callie’s response to a comment by the Object about her appearance is to stay silent, as it “strengthened my position to keep her in doubt” (Page 342). This is a typically masculine response as a means of controlling the self-esteem of a woman. A genuine empathetic female friend would be unlikely to react in so manipulative a way.

There are several small thematic notes to be aware of in this section: Cal describes the summer days Callie spends with the Object in the present tense, highlighting their importance for the reader. Callie and Tessie, in their warped perspective of religion, attend church simply to petition God for the things that will ease their lives. But God does not answer the prayers of the religiously ambivalent, so Callie takes matters into her own hands and fakes getting her period (in this moment, she refuses to be a victim of fate).

Zoe, who has been absent from the narrative for a long stretch, pops in and Cal gives an abbreviated history of her marriage to Father Mike. Narratively unimportant characters drop from the story at Cal’s whim, just as Desdemona has been missing from the text since shortly after Lefty died.

Cal’s narrative style allows him to step out of his own story and offer broad sweeping commentary on international events, as when he chides America for its handling of the Turkish invasion of Cypress. As mentioned earlier, this battle had little significance to fourteen year old Callie beyond getting her out of her trip to Turkey. Adult Cal looking down at the past from the present has an entirely different perspective.

Vocabulary

Isometric, potency, lethargy, palimpsest, hauteur, desultory, malinger, scapular.



Flesh and Blood - The Gun on the Wall

Summary

Before Callie heads off to Petoskey, she watches as Milton, an entrenched supporter of Richard Nixon despite the breaking Watergate scandal, argues in favor of American isolationism with his longtime Greek friends. He turns his back on his heritage. Betrayed, his friends leave in a huff, destroying a decades-long Sunday dinner tradition. Tessie is enraged with Milton for driving their social circle away, and Father Mike comforts her, much to the Zoe's embarrassment.

Callie travels north with the Object's intoxicated father, arriving safely at the familial mansion on Little Traverse Bay. She is surprised to find the Object flirting with Rex Reese, whose family owns property nearby, a fact the Object never mentioned. The four teenagers (including Jerome) slog through a cedar marsh to a hunting lodge, where Rex lights a joint and continues to get drunk. Rex and the Object pair off, leaving Callie no choice but to couple with Jerome.

Callie hopes flirting with him will annoy the Object, but soon Rex and the Object are making out. Drunk and stoned, Callie allows Jerome to follow their lead. Despite his similar appearance to the Object, Callie is not attracted to him. She projects herself into Rex's body, believing she can feel the Object's soft curves. In her inattentiveness, Jerome manages to undress and penetrate Callie, causing her tremendous pain. In that moment she recognizes that she is very different, and thinks Jerome notices too. She is fearful that Jerome will reveal her secret. However, she can tell from his post-coital smile that Jerome is merely self-satisfied at having had sex.

Callie wakes up the next morning alone in the Object's bed. She finds the Object at breakfast. The jealous redhead calls her a slut, urging her to join Jerome in bed. The Object storms out of the house and Callie returns to her own bed, afraid she has lost her best friend. Jerome soon joins her, trying to repeat the previous night's actions and avowing his genuine feelings for her. But, Callie tells him she does not reciprocate the feelings. Jerome quickly leaves. Callie spends the day alone, watching the Object water ski with Rex. Trying to hide her tear stained eyes, Callie is in bed pretending to sleep when the Object comes home.

After the Object falls asleep, Callie touches and kisses her all over. The Object doesn't wake up or protest, only raising her hips for Callie to remove her underwear – the only sign of complicity. The next day the girls don't speak of it, but the Object evades Rex when he calls. Once they go to bed, they repeat the previous night. Callie explores and learns, still not quite understanding her own genitalia or feelings, but both girls enjoy themselves.

Callie and the Object get bolder, letting Callie's hands wander up the Object's shorts while sitting on the porch. Jerome finds them and taunts them with "carpet muncher,"



until he makes his sister sob. He tells Callie he won't reveal their secret if she leaves immediately and never sees his sister again. Callie attacks him, knocking him to the ground and spitting in his face. Enraged, Jerome is ready to kill her, chasing her around the property. As she looks back to see if Jerome is gaining on her, Callie runs right into a tractor driving down a road.

She wakes up in the backseat of the farmer's car on her way to the hospital. Her head in the Object's lap, Callie is elated when the Object kisses her, but they are separated as soon as they arrive at the hospital, and Callie never sees the Object again. As the ER doctor examines her, he discovers the secret Dr. Philobosian never saw.

A week later, Callie is home, waiting in her room with a packed suitcase. She and her parents are traveling to New York to see a famous doctor. In the meantime, Callie listens to her mother weep through the bedroom wall. She gazes at the mulberry tree outside her window, unaware of its connection to her heritage and to Desdemona and silkworms. She still does not know what makes her different.

Analysis

Commenting again on the war between Turkey and Greece, Cal points out, "Cyprus was being cut in half like Berlin, like Korea, like all the other places in the world that were no longer one thing or the other" (Pages 362-63). In this way, Cal's personal identity is a mirror for issues of duality that cross international borders and culture. He is a microcosm of a struggle entire nations struggle with. Ironically, Milton has let go of the struggle. In his desperate determination for upward mobility and to identify as an American, he staunchly supports Richard Nixon and the government's isolationist attitude toward the Mediterranean conflict. He alienates himself from his entirely Greek social circle by turning his back on the country of his heritage, and is thus left alone: no matter how much he wants to fit in, Milton has no "American" friends. Like America itself, Milton is now isolated from society.

Callie compares herself to the mythological Oracle of Delphi on Page 372. Besides using this imagery to describe her own ecstatic state in the cabin with Jerome, the Object, and Rex, this reference to a prophet symbolizes that the story is gearing up for an epic shift; the "prediction" readers have been aware of from the beginning of the novel, that Callie will turn into Cal, is close at hand. However, Cal relates the painful events in the cabin in the past tense. Even though the final countdown to discovery has begun, this particular awkward event does not need to be relived with the urgency of the present moment.

The Object engages in sex shaming, calling Callie a slut because of what happened between her and Jerome and despite the Object's own activities with Rex. Coming from someone other than Callie's own family, readers should note how this illustrates the prevalence of attaching humiliation to sex among women. It's not a problem personal to Cal, but universal and matching the epic scale of the novel. This muddled sense of dishonor rather than a health ability to own her sexuality is further demonstrated when



Jerome crawls into bed with Callie again and Callie has a difficult time simply saying no to him. Women are programmed to please, to be powerless to the demands of men, and in this way, Callie exhibits how her gender results from nurture, the way she has been raised as a girl. There is a similar allusion to the historical precedence for woman's sense of physical shame when Callie watches the Object waterskiing in a bikini and describes it as, "only those two little strips, one above, one below, separating her from Eden" (Page 381). From the time of Eden, women have been taught to disassociate from their bodies by keeping them covered. Thus, Callie and Object explore their sexuality in the darkness, keeping it a secret rather than making it a celebration.

In discussing his own female/male body as a young teenager, Cal writes, "Through all this I made no lasting conclusions about myself. I know it's hard to believe, but that's the way it works. The mind self-edits. The mind airbrushes. It's a different thing to be inside a body than outside. From outside, you can look, inspect, compare. From inside there is no comparison" (Page 387). In a sense, this is a metaphor for his entire writing process. He is outside now, able to look back and inspect and put his life in a context and perspective. He is still prone to self-editing and airbrushing, but he's making a concerted effort to understand and record the truth as he sees it by layering all the information from individual moments and emerging context into a cohesive whole.

At the end of Callie's time with the Object, Cal uses the imagistic metaphor of the Stephanides sailing from Greece to connect Callie's future to her past: the girls' hands and arms stretch like the yarn on the ship, connecting and anchoring them to each other, yet ultimately the yarn breaks, and Callie is "sailing across the sea to another country" (Page 394). She is in transit between female and male, but there is no turning back now from the truth.

As the ER doctors' make the discovery of the Cal's unique body, the metaphor of Chekhov's gun comes full circle: Cal toyed with readers' expectations by briefly inserting a real gun into the narrative, but this explosive moment has been metaphorically on stage from the first page of the novel when Cal announced he was born twice in two genders. Cal is the gun. The girl Callie dies. There is a sense of catharsis to finally have this revelation, long known by the audience, finally known by the primary players.

The past comes full circle as well as Callie sits waiting for her parents to take her to New York, eating berries from the mulberry tree outside her window. Just as at the age of fourteen Callie does not know or understand the connection of that tree to the youth and livelihood of her grandmother (only adult Cal, narrating, can give it its proper significance and context), she does not know or understand what is about to happen to her life, gender, and identity. But the metaphor of the mulberry's associated silkworm is apt: the thread connecting that distant past to her future, the link of a mutated chromosome passed down for generations finally manifesting.

Vocabulary

Castigate, rampant, consummate, aggrieve, supine, gibbous, ribald, extemporize, fugue, scrupulous, ostensible, languorous, effusive, proclivity, apex.



The Oracular Vulva - Looking Myself Up in Webster's

Summary

After Dr. Philobosian, now age eighty-eight but still practicing medicine, finally sees what he missed many years ago, and an endocrinologist at Henry Ford Hospital also confirms it, Milton and Tessie take Callie to Dr. Peter Luce in New York City. While Callie's parents try to keep the atmosphere light, their decrepit accommodations, the Lochmoor Hotel, do not bode well for the visit. But, they all maintain the hope that whatever is "wrong" with Callie must be "fixable."

Dr. Luce, a preeminent expert in gender identity and sexual disorders, observes Callie's physical gestures and tics for hints about her gender identification. After a preliminary physical examination of genitals, he tells Milton and Tessie he wants to study Callie for a couple of weeks to determine the best course of action. Milton hears that a solution will be found, but Tessie only hears Dr. Luce refer to Callie as a "child," without gender specific pronouns. Feeling optimistic, Milton decides to do some business travel, leaving Callie and Tessie alone in the city.

Over two weeks, Dr. Luce examines Callie physically and emotionally: Callie is a hermaphrodite with both sets of genitals, but chromosomally, she is male, with an "XY." He does an extensive verbal and written psychological evaluation. As Callie writes her life story she lies, telling of her sexual encounter with Jerome but leaving the Object out of her narrative. Dr. Luce makes her watch porn to see who arouses her. Raised in a prudish household, Callie finds the films entirely repulsive. He uses her as a prop around important doctors to get funding for his research, using her as proof of his nature over nature thesis.

Milton calls each night to check in, and promises the unhappy Callie she can go home as soon as she's "better," which only makes her fear more what is "wrong" with her. She watches her mother sleep at the hotel, clearly dreaming restless dreams. They have always had the close bond of mother and daughter, and now both dread the ways in which they might change.

After two weeks, Milton returns for Dr. Luce's diagnosis. They drop Callie off at the New York Public Library while they go to Dr. Luce's office, and Tessie immediately notices that the doctor refers to Callie as their "daughter" again. He explains that because Callie has been raised as a girl and thinks of herself as a girl, she is basically a girl. He wants to give Callie hormone injections and some cosmetic surgery to reshape her clitoris and remove her undescended testes. Then, she will be able to live easily and normally as a woman, though she will never have children.



While her parents get this news, Callie spends her time at the library with its enormous dictionary, looking up words she has heard Dr. Luce use about her. Her search for “hypospadias” leads to “hermaphrodite” and “monster.” Callie rushes from the library to find her parents and tries to take comfort in their relieved smiles. Over dinner Milton explains Callie needs a minor surgery and hormones to correct her system’s imbalance. Back at the office, Dr. Luce confirms this. Callie is comforted that a doctor is telling her she’s a girl, though her feelings for the Object nag at her. But, she recognizes how life could be, both for herself and for her parents.

When Dr. Luce leaves the office, Callie peeks at her file and discovers the truth. Genetically, she is a boy. Her personal testimony, coupled with her mannerisms and entrenchment in a strictly gendered religion, lead the doctor to conclude that rearing plays a greater role in gender identity than genetics. He is confident that she can continue as a girl, though the surgery will diminish her ability for sexual pleasure. She feels betrayed. That night, Milton has bought tickets to a Broadway show, but Callie feigns exhaustion. After her parents leave, she packs a suitcase and writes a note explaining that she is a boy and she doesn’t want to go back to Grosse Point where she will be humiliated. She takes all the cash she can find and leaves.

Analysis

Despite his American optimism and identity, Milton cufflinks shaped like Greek drama masks for the meeting with Dr. Luce. When push comes to shove, Milton falls back on his heritage for comfort and luck. The superstitious nature of the act is equivalent to Desdemona and Tessie’s candle lighting in church, which Milton frequently and vocally disparages. The desire for divine intervention seems almost genetic in the Stephanides. The cufflinks duality, one comedy, one tragedy, also acts as a metaphor for the duality of any situation – the way a shift in perspective can move an event or moment from one frame of reference to another. (As a fourteen year old to lose the Object and her sense of identity, the situation was tragic. From the perspective of twenty-five years later, it is not quite a comedy, but Cal has learned to see a lot of the humor in his life.)

Like her father and brother before her, up until her gender crisis Callie was rebelling against her heritage, demanding clothing made of natural fibers, an ironic desire for “purity” within a context where nothing –not her gender, not her ancestry – is pure. Her time with the Object changed her tastes; she emulated her refined, American friend and wants to identify herself more closely with the object that her family. And there is a certain irony in the fact that while writing her history for Dr. Luce, Callie lies and embellishes her story, “pretending to be the all-American daughter my parents wanted me to be” (Page 418). The entire family is colluding in a lie, trying to create a group image and identity for each other and for themselves that simply does not match what they see in the mirror.

Callie is willing to accept the identity others choose for her. She will take the hormones and have the surgery and stay a girl because it will make everyone around her happy (a typically female trait, to put the happiness of others ahead of one’s own). But, when she



reads the genetic truth in Dr. Luce's report, she conflates this with the ultimate truth because it resonates with her attraction to women. Though she could easily stay a woman and live as a lesbian, Callie makes a choice about her gender identity based on what feels more natural to her. Ultimately, her identity is what she makes it. It negates Luce's theories, supporting instead the dominance of genetics over environment.

Since the proper significance and usage of Callie's genitalia have never been open for discussion, Callie's sense of fear surrounding the trip to New York is heightened with an overwhelming fear of the unknown. She is caught between her parents' hopefulness that the problem can be easily "fixed" and a sense of horror about the pejorative semiotics of there being a "problem" at all. Her lifelong subconscious sense of shame about her body is now being proved entirely justified.

Once again furniture moves to the forefront as a symbol of American status. Dr. Luce's office is tastefully and expensively furnished, putting the Stephanides at ease: anyone with that kind of money and elegant possessions was someone the Stephanides' identified with. They considered themselves on an equal social footing, which meant they could trust Dr. Luce. Unfortunately, the subtly erotic art strewn about the office negates this sense of comfort by forcing them to face the thing that as a family they have never once mentioned as even existing, such as a metaphor for what Dr. Luce is about to read to them about Callie. In fact, it becomes clear that Dr. Luce is everything the Stephanides are no. He is the personification of an open, curious, and mainstream comfort with sex.

In this section Cal summarizes the history of scientific research on hermaphroditic and gender identity disorders. He sets Cal's uniqueness into a narrative that makes it less unique, spanning all the way back to the myth that gave the disorder its name, the story of Hermaphrodite. Dr. Luce researches to support his thesis that a child's environment/nurturing is more important to establishing gender identity than nature/genetics. He is quick to read Callie and her history to ensure she supports this thesis, but readers should consider for themselves (even in the face of Callie's decision to run away and live as a boy) what determines gender and the ways in which Callie as a child seemed either masculine or feminine. Dr. Luce makes a choice about Callie, and Callie, no matter how she feels about fate's hand in her existence, makes a different choice. Readers are left to decide if either of them is more "right" than the other.

When describing the black box that would appear over her face in textbook photos of Callie's unusual body in order to create anonymity, Cal says, "a fig leaf in reverse, concealing identity while leaving shame exposed" (Page 422). Readers should once again note this allusion to Eve and the Garden of Eden. Even given the generational sprawl of Cal's narrative, the history of entwining female sexuality and shame goes back much, much further.

Cal contradicts his own claim that his life has been unraveled by the hands of fate when young Callie goes to the library to look up the words that Dr. Luce uses to describe her; this is a clear example of her taking control for herself, wresting understanding from a difficult situation rather than simply being buffeted along by the choices of others.



Though Callie gets stuck on “hermaphrodite’s” synonym, “monster,” keen readers will note that the second definition of “hermaphrodite” – “anything comprised of a combination of diverse or contradictory elements” (Page 430) is the thesis of the entire book. As an adult, Cal is untangling and making peace with the many dualities that exist within him: gender, nationality, emotional. The novel is making a subtle claim that it is perfectly acceptable to be more than one thing in any context.

When Callie makes this discovery of synonymous monstrosity in her own body, Cal shifts his narrative perspective to the third person, underscoring the way in which he tried to disassociate himself from that concept, to push the “monster” outside himself and into another entity entirely. It deepens the reader’s understanding of how painfully revelatory the moment was, that Cal/Callie wanted to act like it was a discovery about someone else.

Vocabulary

Retract, ascension, adamant, obsolete, obtrusive, priapus, ambiguous, oracular, disquisition, forebear, flange, irremediable, riven, deductive, calumny, caustic.



Go West, Young Man - Hermaphroditus

Summary

Terrified but determined, Cal buys a bus ticket at Port Authority to Scranton, Pennsylvania. He stops at a Salvation Army and buys an ill-fitting and old-fashioned men's suit and gets his hair cut at a barbershop. He finds people barely notice him, making him less self-conscious about transitioning into walking and acting like a male. He buys boxers, deodorant, and men's razors.

Cal begins hitchhiking to California, accepting rides from semi-truck drivers and a kindly couple named the Bresnicks in an RV who treat him like their own child. Cal spends nights in motels exploring his body and understanding his sexuality for the first time. He is glad that he didn't allow Dr. Luce to diminish the experience for him. In Nebraska he gets a ride from Ben Scheer, an urbane intellectual that Cal immediately emulates. Ben buys him dinner and a motel room, snuggling into bed with a distressed Cal. Early in the morning, Cal sneaks out and gets a ride with a man in a Lincoln Continental, Bob Presto, who promises to take him all the way to California. He asks a lot of questions, probably because he clearly doesn't believe Cal is an eighteen-year-old freshman starting at Stanford. Presto jokes that he thought Cal was a girl when he first saw him. Cal gets uncomfortable and asks Bob to let him out. Bob promises to stop prying. He takes Cal to San Francisco. He gives Cal a business card, telling him to call if he needs a job.

Back in Grosse Pointe, Tessie monitors an intuitive connection she feels to her children. She is sure Cal is alive, but not doing well. The New York police sent them home to wait, and Dr. Luce evades responsibility for upsetting Cal. Tessie is sedated with tranquilizers, but she is still uneasy. She cannot wrap her mind around Cal being a boy. Milton can't understand why Cal wouldn't want to be cured, and he works to find Cal, calling police stations across the country. The house re-fills with their friends who had shunned them after the Greek invasion.

But, as time drags on, their friends stop coming. They are unsure of how to help. Milton calls Chapter Eleven to come home to comfort the ceaselessly distraught Tessie. Chapter Eleven takes the news of Cal's new gender identity in stride. He has grown tired of his anti-establishment, hippie lifestyle. He is tempted when Milton invites him back into the fold, offering to preen him to run Hercules Hot Dogs one day (even though Chapter Eleven is a vegetarian). Though ever optimistic, Milton's worry bleeds through when he gives Tessie money to light candles at church.

Meanwhile, in San Francisco, Cal falls in with a group of drifters, who follow the Grateful Dead. They smoke and sell pot. They live in a secluded corner of Golden Gate Park. Cal is grateful for the shelter and protection of the group, but mainly keeps to himself, unsure what to do next as his money dwindles. When the Dead perform in San Francisco, Cal guards the camp. Two homeless men come prowling for drugs. As they



search Cal, they find his student ID card and think Cal is a girl. They prepare to rape him but are disgusted when they pull down his pants, kicking and urinating on him. With no money left and unwilling to call his parents, Cal calls Bob Presto.

Bob Preston puts Cal to work in his North Beach strip club, Sixty-Niners, performing in a special underwater show called Octopussy's Garden, where the curious and the kinky can look at his unusual genitalia. He performs with Carmen, a pre-op male-to-female transsexual, and Zora, who has Androgen Insensitivity, meaning that though she is genetically male like Cal, her body is immune to male hormones so she developed as a woman. Cal lives with Zora, who identifies as an hermaphrodite rather than a woman despite her looks. Zora teaches Cal not to feel ashamed of his body as she writes a book on the history of hermaphroditism, giving him comfort in knowing he is not alone. Zora and Cal get stoned at work. This gives Cal the courage to open his eyes underwater and study the people watching him, realizing they find him attractive and interesting, not disgusting and freakish.

In Michigan, Milton and Tessie continue to worry about Cal, bonding in an intimate way that had been missing from their marriage for years. But suddenly, three months after he left, Tessie loses her "umbilical cord" connection to Cal. She can't sense if he's alive anymore. As she despairs, Milton becomes more determined than ever to bring Cal home. While Tessie goes to church one Sunday, Milton gets a mysterious phone call from a man who claims to have kidnapped Cal.

In late January, the police raid Sixty-Niners, and everyone is arrested. With his one phone call, Cal finally calls his parents. Chapter Eleven answers the phone and gives Cal the shocking news that Milton is dead.

Analysis

As the arc of Cal's present life story in Berlin starts to come to a close, Cal recognizes the full circle symmetry of his life. In the formerly divided German city, he lives in a Turkish neighborhood: "We're all made up of many parts, other halves. Not just me" (Page 440). Cal cannot escape his roots, nor does he wish to. Indeed, he advocates the celebration of these self-paradoxes and contrary elements.

Cal's first encounter with the "male" world, in Ed's Barbershop, initiates him into a masculine world of football, cursing, calendars with scantily clad women. Readers should beware of the gender stereotypes inherent in this tableau. Is this truly how to define masculinity, or is this a tongue-in-cheek pastiche?

As Cal points out, his grandparents traveled across an ocean to be reborn as Americans, just as he now travels across the continent to be transformed into a man. The notion of travel – of literally getting outside your comfort zone – in order to metamorphose is a metaphor for the journey of self-transformation itself. The internal struggles and growth are manifested externally. Cal uses unfamiliar locations as a metaphorical catapult for these rebirths: Cal travels out of New York City through the



Lincoln Tunnel into New Jersey and creates a visual image of being pushed out of a birth canal at the precise moment Cal is leaving behind his family and his identity as Callie. He further discusses the transforming aura of San Francisco dating back to the return of World War II soldiers, people getting lost in the constant fog off the bay and emerging as someone new.

Despite his decision to transform into a man, Cal cannot let go entirely of his ingrained feminine behaviors, learned from his mother and grandmother. Cutting off all his hair is “punishing [him]self for loving someone so much” (Page 445). These women have been taught to view their behavior always through the lens of sin, and to seek punishment for their inherent “badness.” Cal cannot shake these self-loathing tendencies as easily as he can lose his hair. It is only as he physically travels further across America, away from the shame-bound mindset of his family, lying alone in motels trying to be a boy, that he has the courage to explore his body, touching himself and understanding the joy it can bring him.

Cal switches to the present tense to narrate his encounter with Myron and Sylvia Bresnick in their RV, highlighting the importance of this moment when he first feels “male-identified.” He does it again when he narrates his encounter with the homeless men who nearly rape him in the present, emphasizing the horror and urgency of the moment.

The imagery of connecting threads takes on a new, metaphorical form in Tessie, who imagines herself connected to her children by an invisible umbilical cord that allows her to feel what they feel. From silkworm thread to yarn to sperm, this physical manifestation of connection across space and time has taken many forms but always has the same essential meaning: the interweaving of lives and the ways people can't help but affect one another, even in absence.

Milton views the issue of Cal's gender in a masculine, linear style. He sees that there is a problem and there will be a solution, a clear journey from A to B. He cannot quite grasp why his daughter can't simply follow that narrative path to its obvious conclusion. On the other hand, Tessie's thoughts are more feminine, circular, and obsessive on details like Luce's use of the word “child” rather than “daughter.” Once Cal runs away, she cannot wrap her mind around not having a daughter anymore no matter how much she thinks about it. She doesn't foresee a simple conflict/resolution dichotomy, instead envisioning sin and punishment, a never-ending Sisyphian type of hell. Her dreams are filled with her recurring (somehow even recycled from Desdemona) sense of foreboding and retribution for attempting to bend God's will to their own. She cannot escape God even though she does not truly believe He exists. Readers will note that when Father Mike comforts Tessie during Cal's absence, Cal the omniscient narrator cannot read his thoughts. This is only one of a few instances when Cal cannot penetrate the mind of someone in his narrative.

Cal uses another trick of perspective to give readers an unusual viewpoint: he enters the consciousness of Mr. Go, a patron of the Sixty-Niners strip club, using him to vividly set the scene at the club and guiding readers through him (as if the readers are such



patrons too) to the discovery of Cal's job in the underwater show at Bob Presto's club. Cal steps out of the narrative to discourse on the many theories of gender, the argument between nature versus nurture that has raged for centuries. His ultimate conclusion: "Free will is making a comeback. Biology gives you a brain. Life turns it into a mind" (Page 479). Cal's journey is a microcosm of this debate, and this conclusion. No matter how he feels fate played a role in getting him born in his unique state, Cal makes the choice to live as a man, factoring in his natural inclinations and feelings, as well as the available genetic data.

There is a tongue-in-cheek use of mythology (the Hermaphrodite myth) in Bob Presto's pornographic water show. The two are equated as ancient and universal aspects of human need: sex and storytelling. Zora represents the course of Cal's life had he chosen to live as a woman. Though he would have looked slightly less feminine than Zora because their genetic disorders are different, Zora is also technically a man, who only dates lesbians. It would have been possible, but Cal chose what felt most right to him in that moment of discovery. Zora gives Cal books that give him a range of perspectives on gender.

Cal explores the mistaken notion that because he becoming more truly himself, a powerfully dual human being, it might make his spiritual life and connection to divine forces easier, but unfortunately his spiritual ambivalence, while not genetic, has been too deeply nurtured into him by his family. The revelation of Milton's death at the end of this section is one of the only instances of true surprise in the novel. Almost every major plot point or event is alluded to or revealed before it actually occurs, allowing the narrative to flow circuitously back to it. There is some foreshadowing of a disaster in Milton's future in earlier chapters, but this moment has genuine shock value for readers, creating a truthful emotional response and evoking a classic (linear) Greek catharsis.

Vocabulary

Pugnacious, opine, renounce, frigidity, parched, unguent, adhere, flatulent, pliant, existential, meticulous, dissipate, patrician, affable, secluded, cohort.



Air Ride - The Last Stop

Summary

In present day Berlin, Cal attends an art opening at the Neue Nationalgalerie half hoping to run into Julie. He lucks out when she stumbles upon him smoking a cigar. He is surprised when she accepts his challenge to smoke one and does so deftly. He finally gathers the courage to tell her the truth about himself. Though surprised, Julie is still willing to give it a shot with Cal. He takes her home and they slow dance and get into bed, each wondering if they will be the other person's last stop.

The story reverses to January, 1975. It is after Milton receives a series of Sunday morning phone calls from the kidnapper who backs his claim with details about the Stephanides family, demanding \$25,000 in ransom. One night Milton sets out in his Cadillac Eldorado at 2am to deliver the money. Tessie hears him but doesn't ask where he's going and Milton has mentioned the plot to no one, determined to take care of everything himself without worrying Tessie.

Milton approaches the decrepit Grand Trunk Station to set the money in a garbage can on a train platform. As he gets back into the car, he has second thoughts, and returns to the platform, but is shocked to find Father Mike with the briefcase of cash. He shouts to Mike, who promptly races to his car and leads Milton in a reasonably paced chase. Milton is confident he will catch him until Mike heads to the Ambassador Bridge to Canada, where Milton is not sure the law will help him. Mike gets through customs quickly, but Milton gets stuck in traffic, honking and shouting, which leads to him being detained at the customs station. Determined not to lose Mike, Milton blazes through to the bridge. Mike, too focused on watching Milton in his rearview mirror, doesn't notice the brake lights in front of him, and both he and Milton crash, though Milton has an out of body experience where the Eldorado flies off the bridge and across the sad remains of the city of Detroit. Milton, mad at himself for rushing into this situation, regrets not being able to bring Cal home for Tessie before he dies.

Soon after, Chapter Eleven goes to San Francisco to get Cal out of jail, and barely reacts to Cal's new gender, accepting it with gentle teasing and their shared grief for their father. Chapter Eleven fills him in on the details of the car chase and Father Mike's full confession in the hospital. They fly back to Detroit on the morning of Milton's funeral, and Cal requests that Chapter Eleven drive him through downtown Detroit, nostalgically observing all the places that were prominent in his youth. They arrive at Middlesex and Cal has an awkward reunion with his mother, who feels Cal's new identity is a punishment, but something she must accept for Cal's sake. She watches Cal and Chapter Eleven interact, understanding the situation is not a tragedy.

Desdemona, still bedridden in the guesthouse, demands Epsom salt to soak her feet. Cal volunteers and goes out to see his grandmother, whose mind has begun to fail. Desdemona initially thinks Cal is Lefty, but Cal tells her he is her grandson; Desdemona



doesn't remember Calliope nor that Milton has died. But she has a sudden moment of clarity and is shocked by Cal's appearance. She blames herself, admitting to Cal that Lefty was her brother, a secret no one ever knew. Cal decides to skip Milton's funeral in order to stay with Desdemona. He promises Desdemona he won't tell anyone her secret until after she is dead. Few people attend Milton's funeral, but his old Greek friends show up despite their differences. Upholding the Greek tradition, Cal guards the door of the house against the return of Milton's spirit.

Analysis

As the novel reaches its climax, readers come full circle in multiple ways: Before, Lefty and Desdemona transited through the vibrant and crowded Grand Trunk Station with their secret in tow, on a way to start a new life; now Milton returns to Grand Trunk, empty and ruined, to uncover a secret on his journey to death. There is an effective cleanness to this structural device. During Milton's funeral procession, the hearse and limousines cross paths with a group of Shriners riding motorcycles and wearing fezzes, fulfilling the final memorable fez moment in Cal's family history. The moment was foreshadowed chapters and decades ago. Milton's own identity comes full circle. The Greek-American friends he once shunned in a statement of his American patriotism prove their loyalty in the end by attending his funeral, unlike all his "American" business acquaintances that he met as he built his American hot dog empire.

As Milton takes his final surreal auto-flight over Detroit, he witnesses Detroit's degeneration. Yet, among the empty lots he notices grass and corn sprouting up, offering a symbolic hope that Detroit might be reborn with a whole new identity. Detroit, returning to the nature and open space upon which its circular city plan was designed and erected, has itself come full circle. Cal's nostalgic ride through Detroit with Chapter Eleven on his way home reinforces this hope, as he is filled with awe at the vibrant humanity still traversing Detroit's streets.

The novel comes full circle with the reappearance of Desdemona, who has been absent from the story for multiple chapters because she was unnecessary in the narrative.. Desdemona's full circle is peculiar, and she shares it with Tessie. They both see Cal's new gender identification as the long-awaited punishment for near-forgotten sins. Desdemona's incestuous relationship with Lefty, and Tessie and Milton's attempt to play God and control Cal's gender in the first place. There is a certain amount of catharsis from the release of that constant fearful tension and both women accept Cal much more easily than they might have otherwise. Desdemona even feels relieved and safe enough to reveal her secret for the first time. Humans are adaptable and get used to change, especially when bolstered by the all-encompassing empathy of maternal love.

Cal alludes to the traditional tragic structure of Greek drama, which ends with death and thereby offers the audience a cathartic purging of emotion. Yet, catharsis has evolved since the time of the ancient Greeks, and Cal has incorporated the American need for optimism into his narrative structure. Rather than ending with the horror of Milton's untimely death (a death that results from the traditionally tragic Greek flaw of hubris),



Cal goes home to reunite with his mother, brother, and grandmother. He finds a different kind of redemption in the acceptance of his new gender identity. Cal remains behind from his father's funeral in order to perform the traditional Greek rite of barring the deceased's spirit from re-entering the home (coming full circle from the description of this custom at Jimmy Zizmo's funeral). Standing in the door of his home, Cal epitomizes the perfect metaphor of duality: the home he last left as a girl he now re-enters as a man; he performs an ancient Greek tradition in his modern American home. Cal stands on multiple thresholds, always striving for balance.

Cal and Julie's agreement in 2001 to pursue their romantic relationship fully and in good faith gives the narrative a traditional happy ending to the story of "boy meets girl." Readers arrive at this resolution before the novel's end because Cal's rebirth into the womb of his family is a more pivotal resolution in Cal's timeline. Without that event and the acceptance it underscores, the moment with Julie twenty-five years later would not be possible. Past affects present in meaningful ways.

Vocabulary

Scarcity, opulent, luminescence, indispensable, insidious, benignant, pacifism, abscond, fulminate, transcendent, lucid, imminent, reprise.



Characters

Calliope (Cal) Stephanides

Calliope (Cal) Stephanides is the narrator and protagonist of *Middlesex*. He tells his life story from the age of forty-one as an attractive but slight man prone to double-breasted suits and cigars. Born a hermaphrodite (he has 5-alpha reductase syndrome, which makes him appear female though he is genetically male), Cal spent his first fourteen years living comfortably as a girl, Calliope, only mildly concerned about his attraction to other girls. But upon discovering that genetically he is male, he throws his life into an uproar and transitions into living as a man. Even after twenty-five years, Cal is not entirely comfortable in his own skin, embarrassed by his body and what others will think of it – a physical shame that seems inherited from his mother and grandmother. His self-doubt may come from being raised as a girl during those formative years; Cal lacks his father's unmerited but unyielding self-confidence. He builds a career in the Foreign Service precisely so he can stay in constant motion, evading his fear of the truth as it pertains to stable, romantic relationships. He is self-aware and constantly questioning, trying to understand how the puzzle pieces of his life came together to make him the person he is. He feels the tension of his dual gender, either distancing himself from or empathizing with the girl Calliope that continues to live inside him. In some ways he has come to terms with the ways in which he is more male or more female, and tells his story in a circular, feminine way that makes connections across time and space, looking for symbols and significance in the mundane. In addition, he expresses the duality of his nature as a second generation Greek-American. Raised in a strong Greek Orthodox tradition, Cal chooses the elements of his cultural heritage that enhance his life and lets the rest slide away. Untangling the threads of his ancestry and writing this "memoir" seems to have contributed to Cal's self-acceptance, giving him the courage to tell Julie Kikuchi, his love interest, the truth about his gender identity and asking to pursue a long-term relationship with her. Their union, a Greek American hermaphrodite and a boyish Asian-American, represents the ultimate in the melting pot of the American Dream.

Milton Stephanides

Milton Stephanides is Cal's father. Even with bad skin and a balding head, Milton never lacks for self-confidence, pursuing whatever he wants with a resolute certainty that he is always right. He is often compared to a bull. He looks for solutions rather than focusing on problems. Though Tessie initially finds him less than ambitious during their courtship, Milton proves otherwise when he starts his hot dog empire. He is not interested in quality or good taste. He just wants to become wealthy and provide for his family. He has visions of climbing the ladder of the American Dream with the most quintessentially American food, the hot dog. Milton, a first generation Greek-American, is determined to live in the same social and economic strata as families who have lived in the country for generations. He is willing to stomp on his heritage in order to align himself with



American values. Conservative, racist, and xenophobic, Milton is nevertheless loyal and loving to his family. At the moment of his death, he regrets that he has not been able to “fix” Cal's problems or heal Tessie's broken heart in Cal's absence. His premature death is treated as positive in the sense that his linear brain and problem-solving attitude might not be able to accommodate the massive shift required by Cal's new gender identity.

Tessie Stephanides

Tessie Stephanides is Cal's mother. She is generically pretty in an American, girl-next-door way. Tessie conforms to society's expectations, submitting to her husband's will as she performs her wifely duties. Though her mother is sexually rebellious, Tessie has a sense of shame associated with sexuality, isolating her from first her mother and then her daughter. She also has an ambivalent relationship with religion, being the type of person who wants to believe in something more than she actually believes. Yet she holds onto a superstitious and punishing interpretation of religion, believing Cal's hermaphroditism is a penalty for trying to manipulate the baby's gender before he is born. In her traditional female gender identity, Tessie has cultivated maternal pride and flexibility, a submissiveness to the will of others, and these traits equip her for a full acceptance of Cal's new life as a man.

Desdemona Stephanides

Desdemona Stephanides is the Stephanides matriarch, Lefty's sister and wife. Desdemona's life is ruled by a sense of guilt and impending punishment because of her incestuous relationship with her brother. She spends most of her life repenting her sin with Lefty, and praying for celestial intervention in her life's woes. Though in Bithynios she does the brunt of the work in earning the family's income, a traditionally male activity, once in America, Desdemona conforms to a traditional gender role, keeping house and raising children and withholding sex from her husband. As a hypochondriac, she becomes an old woman long before she ages, shunning her sexuality as manifested in her voluptuous body as a burden rather than an asset. She longs to die after Lefty does, but also manages to outlive her son. There is a certain relief when she discovers Cal is a boy. Her fifty years of fear are finally given a release in this “punishment” for her transgression.

Eleutherios (Lefty) Stephanides

Eleutherios (Lefty) Stephanides is Cal's grandfather, and Desdemona's brother and husband. Though somewhat guilty, Lefty is more at ease with his feelings for Desdemona than she is, and works to have a real marriage with her, though she pushes him away. He intended to be a scholar back in Bithynios, but accepts his diminished social status in his new nation. He loses himself in Greek poetry and translations, but fulfills his traditional gender role, supporting his family by any means necessary, whether through



illegal alcohol sales or pornography. He occasionally becomes resentful of this burden, however, regretting the time spent away from his children. He becomes more American than his wife does, and more liberal than his son, refusing to take sides in racial disputes and casting aside religion without much thought. He dies before Cal is reborn as a male, so he doesn't have to deal with that transition. As a little girl, Callie is close to Lefty even though Lefty is never able to speak to her because of his stroke.

Sourmelina (Lina) Zizmo

Sourmelina (Lina) Zizmo is Lefty and Desdemona's cousin, who was shipped off to America when her lesbian tendencies started to make her unmarriageable in Bithynios. With her love of modern clothes and technology, Lina assimilates into American culture much more easily than her cousins. Lina lacks a real maternal instinct and challenges traditional female roles, staying true to herself and returning to her real sexual orientation after Jimmy dies.

Jimmy Zizmo

Jimmy Zizmo is a Greek American more interested in money than love. He negotiates the best deal to get a wife to take care of him; he has a strong sense of gender roles and a "woman's place," though Sourmelina rarely obeys his orders. He engages in risky, illegal behavior like rum-running in order to earn the most money possible, and even later, when he is reborn as Fard Muhammad, founder of Detroit's Nation of Islam, he does it in order to wring money from poor blacks. He is paranoid and has an inexplicable chip on his shoulder, and no sense of responsibility, faking his death and walking away from his family without remorse.

Zoe Stephanides Antoniou

Zoe Stephanides Antoniou is Lefty and Desdemona's second child. She is four years younger than Milton. Square jawed and not particularly pretty, she is opinionated and strong. Though at one point she mocks Tessie for considering marrying Father Mike, she ends up marrying him when no one else will have her. She spends their marriage dominating and belittling him, unhappy with the course her life takes.

Michael Antoniou

Michael Antoniou is the Greek Orthodox priest who wants to marry Tessie but settles for Zoe. Though respected within the Greek Orthodox Church, Father Mike cannot control his wife and is shamed for being poorer than Milton, who stole Tessie away from him. He finally tries to take his revenge on his disrespectful family by pretending to have kidnapped Cal and demanding \$25,000 in ransom. He is more or less directly responsible for Milton's death, leading him on an unnecessary car chase when he is discovered as the false kidnapper.



Chapter Eleven Stephanides

Chapter Eleven Stephanides is Cal's older brother by six years. Readers never learn his real name. His nickname is the result of him bankrupting Hercules Hot Dogs when he takes over after Milton's death. Chapter Eleven rebels against his parents while in college, caught between their oppressive Greekness and the more mainstream, liberal world he encounters once he leaves home. He becomes a drug-taking hippie, determined to live off the land rather than attend an "establishment" university. Chapter Eleven is the first to unconsciously notice Cal's difference when he points out how high her baptismal urine arcs as a baby, setting him up as observant but nonjudgmental. His acceptance of Cal's new gender comes more easily than their mother's, demonstrating a generational difference.

Julie Kikuchi

Julie Kikuchi is the thirty-six year old Asian-American photographer whom Cal meets and finds himself instantly attracted to in Berlin. Her romantic history is almost as tortured as Cal's, having frequently found herself dating closeted gay men before they finally decide to come out. Once she learns the truth about Cal, she is wary that he is somehow part of this pattern. However, their emotional connection is strong enough that she chooses to give their relationship a chance.

Dr. Philobosian

Dr. Philobosian is a Turkish Armenian whose family is killed during the siege of Bursa. Devastated, he wants to commit suicide. However, since he tended to Lefty when he was hurt, Lefty is determined to help Dr. Philobosian survive and make it to America. Dr. Philobosian is the first person to misidentify Cal's gender, failing to notice his hermaphroditic genitalia, and thus setting into motion Cal's journey of self-discovery over the course of many years.

Clementine Stark

Clementine Stark is an eight-year-old neighbor that Callie befriends when the Stephanides moves to Grosse Pointe. Clementine engages Callie in a kissing game that stirs feelings in the prepubescent Callie that are the first hint of what she will grow up to be. Clementine disappears from the narrative as quickly as she appears, moving away soon after Callie moves in. However, she plays that important role of initiating Callie into her sexual identity.



The Obscure Object

The Obscure Object is a beautiful redheaded fourteen-year-old girl who attends private school with Callie. Though she moves in the highest level of social strata at the school (the "Charm Bracelets"), she and Callie become friends while working on a staging of "Antigone." Their friendship grows until it turns sexual, but the Object is clearly conflicted in her feelings, refusing to acknowledge the true nature of their relationship outside the bedroom. Callie's relationship with the Object is the reason she ultimately follows her DNA and starts living as a boy.

Jerome

Jerome is the Obscure Object's older brother who has a crush on Cal and takes his virginity when Cal is still a girl. He genuinely likes "Callie," but in his jealousy and hurt pride threatens Cal when he realizes something sexual is happening between Cal and his sister. Jerome is the reason Cal's hermaphroditism is finally exposed when they get into a fight that results in Callie running into the road and being hit by a tractor.

Peter Tatakis

Peter Tatakis is a longtime family friend and chiropractor who spends his Sundays dining with the Stephanides family. He gives Milton a great deal of misinformation on how to conceive a baby of one gender or the other.

Dr. Peter Luce

Dr. Peter Luce is a renowned sexologist, running a clinic for gender identity and sexual disorders in New York City. He believes gender is more a result of nurturing than genetic nature, and he uses Cal's case to try to prove this thesis, taking Cal's written and verbal psychological history as proof that despite his XY chromosome, Cal could easily spend the rest of his life living as a female.

Bob Presto

Bob Presto is an enormously fat man who runs the Sixty-Niners strip club in San Francisco. He gives Cal a ride as he hitchhikes west, and immediately recognizes that Cal has an unusual gender situation, not sure if he is a male or female. Though creepy and blunt, Bob gives Cal an opportunity to work and get off the streets of San Francisco by introducing him to people who help him understand himself better.

Zora

Zora is a hermaphrodite with Androgen Insensitivity, who is genetically male but has an immunity to testosterone, making her develop as a beautiful, much-sought woman. She takes Cal under her wing and teaches him that he is not a monster just because his genitals are unique. In the years before an organized intersex movement, Zora writes a book celebrating sexual differences and promoting tolerant attitudes toward sexual proclivities.



Objects/Places

The Silkworm Box

The Silkworm Box is Desdemona's prized possession. She brought it to America all the way from Bithynios. She keeps her treasures in it, including her wedding crowns and the silver spoon.

The Silver Spoon

The Silver Spoon is a utensil that Desdemona Stephanides uses to predict the sex of unborn babies. By dangling it over pregnant women's stomachs, she accurately predicts twenty-three births, including Cal's.

Bithynios

Bithynios is the town in Turkey where the Stephanides clan originated. It was part of territory contested between Greece and Turkey during the breakup of the Ottoman Empire after World War I ends, and the Stephanides are ethnic Greeks even though the town is part of Turkey for most of their lives there.

The Zebra Rug

The Zebra Rug is a real zebra hide owned by Jimmy Zizmo that Lefty hangs on the wall of his speakeasy, giving it the bar's name, the Zebra Room.

The Clarinet

The Clarinet is an instrument played by Milton, which he uses as part of his erotic courtship of Tessie, playing the clarinet directly into parts of her body.

Assumption Greek Orthodox Church

Assumption Greek Orthodox Church is the church that forms the basis of the Stephanides community. Desdemona and Tessie spend a great deal of time praying and lighting candles at the church and asking for God's assistance with all their problems. Lefty and Milton don't bother attending services, but they do converse with all the other Greek men in the neighborhood on Sundays.



Middlesex

Middlesex is the street on which the Stephanides live in Grosse Pointe. It also refers to the house itself which is a strange modernist construction by an architect named Hudson Clark. The structure has glass for walls and sliding accordion doors. It is the only house the Stephanides can buy in the affluent suburb where ethnic families are generally kept out.

Hercules Hot Dogs

Hercules Hot Dogs is the chain of hot dog stands that Milton starts after the Detroit race riots destroy the failing Zebra Room bar. He uses the insurance payout from Lefty's three insurance policies to start it, expanding throughout the Midwest and Florida.

Cadillacs

Cadillacs are Milton's car of choice. They are a status symbol that he has achieved a level of upward social mobility that means he fits in with the American way of life.. He has purchased a new Cadillac every year for the last eight years of his life.

Baker and Inglis

Baker and Inglis is the private, all-girls school that Milton sends Tessie to after a prominent local judge decides to eliminate de facto segregation by busing suburban children back into Detroit. Though mainly attended by WASP-y girls, Callie and a few other ethnic girls also attend and exist on the lowest rung of the school's social hierarchy.

The Charm Bracelets

Charm bracelets are the key accessory of the Baker and Inglis students who dominate the school socially. They show off the girls' wealth and good taste.

Temple No. 1

Temple No. 1 is a meeting hall and house of worship of the newly established Nation of Islam, where Desdemona goes to work when they need help raising and harvesting silkworms to make their own clothes. She discovers the leader, Fard Muhammad, is actually Jimmy Zizmo, whom the family thought was dead.



Sixty-Niners

Sixty-Niners is the strip and sex club in San Francisco's North Beach, run by Bob Presto, where Cal gets a job displaying his unusual genitalia after he runs away from his family.

Pomerania

Pomerania is an area of Germany where Cal takes Julie Kikuchi for a romantic weekend. The trip heightens their connection and pushes him to immediately break off his relationship with her rather than tell her the truth about his body.



Themes

Gender, Identity, and Rebirth

As a hermaphrodite, gender plays a pivotal role in Cal's life. As a narrator he is hyper-aware of how gender manifests itself in both himself and those around him. He points out the ways in which the people in his life conform to and deny traditional gender roles. Desdemona and Tessie act traditionally. They cook and tend house. They are submissive to their husbands. They feel shameful about their bodies and sexuality. The feelings of shame are more prevalent in women than men. Sourmelina has little interest in child rearing. On the surface, she seems to obey her husband; however, in reality, she does whatever she pleases to do. Zoe similarly dominates her husband, Father Mike. Cal notes how diminished Mike's sense of himself as a man is because of Zoe's domination. Milton and Tessie follow traditional gender patterns in how they handle Cal's disappearance: Milton wants to solve the problem, taking linear steps to try to bring his child home. Tessie obsessively circles around the same thoughts, unsure how to accept the information that her daughter is actually a boy.

Though Cal follows his DNA and lives his life as a man, this is a choice despite his obsession with fate's role in his life. Cal was never uncomfortable as a girl, never felt he was trapped in the wrong body except for his attraction to women. Even after twenty years as a man, he tells his story in accordance with the female pattern of thought: "All I know is this: despite my androgenized brain, there's an innate feminine circularity in the story I have to tell" (Page 20). As a man, he overcompensates for his small genitals by dressing in ultra-sleek masculine suits and smoking cigars. Cal is aware of his gender at all times because he feels the duality of his gender, the ways in which he conforms to both.

On a grander scale, a duality of identification permeates the novel. All three generations of Stephanides struggle with assimilating into American culture, while also holding onto their ancestral heritage. For example, Desdemona considers herself Greek, and on a certain level, Turkish. She must now incorporate American as well. Individuals are given the opportunity to reinvent themselves throughout the novel, with cities such as New York and San Francisco acting as metaphorical wombs to give people a second chance at life. Detroit, torn about its own identity, has a phoenix on its flag: it too still has a chance to be reborn.

Ultimately, the novel presents the thesis that how you identify yourself in terms of gender, ethnicity, nationality, or religion makes no difference. If you are at peace with yourself, your choices in identification are the right choices. There is no wrong answer in deciding who you are.



The Importance of the Past in the Present, and the Resonance of Mythology

Cal begins his story with his grandparents' courtship, almost forty years before he was born. He believes the past is key to understanding the present and to explaining how he came to have a mutated chromosome that made him a hermaphrodite. His story reaches back further than that, to the roots of Greek culture in mythology - Calliope herself is the Muse of epic poetry; Middlesex itself is a postmodern example of an epic poem – a sprawling journey across continents, a struggle to reach a physical or metaphorical home, the story of the Greek diaspora to America. Eugenides ties a literary tradition from a “B.C.” world to the twenty-first century. Cal's invocation of the Muses emphasizes the ways in which his story reaches back much further than his own gene pool.

History cycles through the same stories and events century after century. Greek mythology is still relevant today because of the universal themes myths exhibit. The word “hermaphrodite” comes from a Greek myth; Cal is not a freak or a new invention of evolution. His story is as old as human storytelling itself. Middlesex rides the fence between finding this continuity comforting and disturbing; Cal finds relief when he realizes he is part of a community of gender ambiguous people in San Francisco. He is not alone, his story is not new. On the other hand, humans cannot learn the lessons of war, cannot rise above lust, and so the same mistakes are perpetuated down through the generations. Cal looks for patterns of behavior within his own family, how habits and feelings are passed down from woman to woman, such as a feeling of embarrassment regarding sexuality, which have nothing to do with genetics. He seeks ways to rise above these patterns – even his own, his shamed, repetitious running away from the possibility of love and stability. But, he appreciates that the past cannot be escaped. Humans must acknowledge their personal and ancestral history if they are to achieve any sense of self-awareness.

Faith as Superstition

Religion plays a large role in the lives of the Stephanides' family, but the presentation of this religiosity is subconsciously negative. None of the characters have a positive relationship with God; their belief is generally based on fear and superstition. Desdemona epitomizes this disconnect. The most overtly religious, attending her Greek Orthodox Church each Sunday and demanding Cal be baptized, Desdemona is constantly terrified that God will punish her and Lefty for their incestuous relationship – a sin for which there seems to be no forgiveness in her mind. Every bad thing that happens she sees as the direct manifestation of God's wrath in her life: from Milton's assignment as a signal man in the Navy, to his attraction to Tessie, to Lefty's stroke. The irony is there is something of a “punishment:” the elder Stephanides' transgression results in Cal's hermaphroditism, a harrowing and confusing (though ultimately manageable) condition. In Desdemona's mind of cause and effect, God smote her through her grandchild.



Desdemona holds onto her faith in America as an important piece of her heritage and culture. As an example of the family's inevitable assimilation into the American lifestyle, both Milton and Tessie are much more ambivalent about their religion. Milton does not believe it is truly necessary to baptize his children. He refuses to attend church, and gets mad at himself when he slips into his mother's superstitious ways and asks Tessie to light candles for Cal's safe return when he runs away. Tessie goes to church, but doesn't really believe in anything. Her brief attraction to Father Mike is based more on "her desperate yearning to believe that there was something instead of nothing" (Page 178) rather than genuine interest or affection. Like Desdemona, she falls back on a superstitious use of religion; God gives or withholds good fortune, and she asks him for favors without putting in the time or effort to deserve them. In the final generation, Cal seems just as ambivalent as his mother toward religion, not even pretending to believe in anything.

Style

Point of View

Cal is a first person narrator who is also omniscient, an unusual storytelling device. Besides relating all his own inner thoughts and feelings, Cal has complete insight into the thoughts and feelings of all the other characters in the novel. He accurately describes in detail the events of his grandparents' and parents' lives that occurred for four decades before he was born. Despite the strangeness of Cal's ability to describe not only his own conception but that of his parents, Cal is presented as a reliable narrator. The novel is structured as his personal memoir, and readers have no reason to distrust the truth as he tells it.

Occasionally, Cal's omniscience becomes limited: he cannot penetrate the thoughts of Desdemona after Lefty dies. He also sometimes refers to "Calliope" in the third person, describing the thoughts and feelings of his feminine self with omniscience but from a distance, emphasizing his disconnection from that earlier manifestation of himself.

The narrator is also very self-referential: Cal remains constantly aware that he is telling his story to an audience, writing a "memoir." He frequently interrupts the action to analyze it with the twenty-twenty vision of hindsight. He makes biased commentary on events of national and international significance. This self-consciousness makes the novel postmodern in scope, as does the fact that Cal can describe events almost as an eyewitness even though he was not there.

Most of the novel is told in the past tense, but Cal occasionally lapses into the present tense, usually at significant moments as a way to add emphasis and urgency to the event and highlight its importance for the reader.

Setting

Middlesex spans continents and generations: It begins in a village in Turkey, inhabited by ethnic Greeks, and moves to Detroit, Michigan with brief interludes in New York City and San Francisco, California; both these cities play a metaphorical role in the novel, acting as portals where people can be reborn (Lefty and Desdemona in New York, Cal in San Francisco). The novel is told from the perspective of 2001, recounting events primarily from 1922 to 1975; Cal's life between the initial tenuous acceptance of his male gender identity to his arrival in 2001 Berlin is only intermittently touched upon. Berlin, too, is a metaphorical city: a metropolis divided for decades into two, now in the process of healing into a unified whole, just as Cal tries to reconcile the duality of his gender.

Detroit (and its environs) is the primary setting. The city's slow decline over the fifty plus years of the novel mirrors the erosion of the Stephanides identity as Greeks as they assimilate into Americans. The fortunes of the city reflect those of the Stephanides:



when Detroit implodes, so do the fortunes of the Stephanides. Fortunately, the Stephanides have a safety net in their insurance policy which allows them to participate in the migration to suburbia, where most whites flee as the city declines – the ultimate expression of the twentieth century American Dream. The ethnic Stephanides are not welcomed into upper class white society, which is reflected in the brutal race divisions in Detroit. The history of the city is woven throughout the narrative, creating a strong, specific sense of place and anchoring the novel in reality. And just as the Stephanides have opportunities to be reborn throughout their lives, Cal is hopeful that Detroit itself can undergo regeneration, rising from the ashes like the mythological phoenix on its flag.

Language and Meaning

Middlesex, immersed in the history of a Greek-American family, is strewn with bits and pieces of the Greek language and mythology. But told from the perspective of 2001, the narrator, Cal, uses his very personal voice to recount eighty years of family history; he is not a detached or impersonal narrator. One imagines he writes as he would speak, informally, conversationally, and with a sharp, quick pace. When recording dialogue Cal allows each character his or her distinct speaking voice (for example, giving Desdemona the broken English of a stubborn immigrant), but when he carries the narrative to 1920s Turkey Cal does not take on a different tone, rather uniformly describing the world from the perspective of an American man living in twenty-first century Berlin. He does not try to infuse time periods with a narrative authenticity, but rather remains acutely himself throughout his chronicle (proving that subconsciously at least, he does in fact have a strong sense of self, even if that identity is infused with self-doubt and hyper criticalness). His voice has a postmodern tinge, commentating and analyzing even as events unfold; at the same time, Cal's voice is so instilled with authority that it becomes almost difficult to remember that the commentary is coming from the distance of hindsight, rather than occurring with its meaning immediately and clearly evident.

The novel relies little on subtext or indeed subtlety: Cal points out his themes and metaphors almost as they happen. Readers are taken on his journey of self-discovery, but he certainly holds the reins for the trip, making conscious choices of when to reveal and when to withhold information.

Cal uses metaphors to create vivid imagery; particularly potent is the recurring image of thread, unspooling from Desdemona's silkworms and down the generations, manifesting in the yarn streaming from the ship as the Stephanides sail away from Greece forever; in the myth of the Minotaur as a means for Theseus to find his way out of the maze; in the sperm traveling to the egg that creates Cal; in the invisible umbilical cord Tessie feels connecting her to her children. This imagery echoes with the symbolic resonance of thread as a connecting device through time and space.

Structure

Middlesex is divided into four books, and twenty-eight chapters. Book One begins in 1922 and covers Lefty and Desdemona's life in Bithynios in Turkey through their arrival in America; Book Two follows the Stephanides' clan up until Calliope's conception and Desdemona's gender prediction. Book Three is Cal's life as a girl until her unusual genitalia is revealed; and Book Four is her personal discovery that she is a boy and her transition into manhood, ending with her father's death in 1975. Threaded throughout this history is Cal's present day life at the age of 41, living in Berlin and pursuing an Asian-American woman named Julie Kikuchi. The narrative structure moves back and forth, circling back to events that have already been revealed: from the first page readers know Cal is a hermaphrodite, telling his own story from the future, rather than unfolding slowly to that moment of discovery as Cal himself does at age fourteen. Readers know Father Mike marries Cal's Aunt Zoe rather than Tessie well before the event occurs, and that there is incest in the family history from Page 3.

Even Chapter Eleven's nickname implies bankruptcy, which does not become explicitly revealed until the penultimate chapter of the novel. Cal himself explains this circularity of structure in the first chapter, describing it as a feminine way of thinking and describing events, and thus alluding to his own continuing gender ambiguity. An event in the past will frequently remind Cal of an incident from the more recent past, and he constantly makes these thematic connections in his own history. The only story readers learn about in his present involves his romance with Julie Kikuchi, an arc that begins in the opening of Chapter 3 and ends at the beginning of the final chapter, interwoven throughout the rest of the story, and creating a small story arc that develops in a traditional linear style as it must for Cal: readers don't know until the end if he and Julie will have a happy ending. Similarly, Milton's premature death, which encompasses the final scenes of the novel, is not explicitly referenced before its occurrence, though there is some oblique foreshadowing of an impending tragedy. By withholding this information until the final chapters, Cal/Eugenides creates a more powerful emotional reaction in readers, allowing for the shock and catharsis moment of traditional Greek drama.

Quotes

All I know is this: despite my androgenized brain, there's an innate feminine circularity in the story I have to tell. In any genetic history. I'm the final clause in a periodic sentence, and that sentence begins a long time ago, in another language, and you have to read it from the beginning to get to the end, which is my arrival.

She dropped the tray, saw her tunic flutter from interior force, and understood that her heart operated on its own instructions, that she had no control over it or, indeed, over anything else.

Desdemona and Lefty circumambulated the captain, once, twice, and then again, spinning the cocoon of their life together. No patriarchal linearity here. We Greeks get married in circles, to impress upon ourselves the essential matrimonial facts: that to be happy you have to find variety in repetition; that to go forward you have to come back where you began.

What's the reason for studying history? To understand the present or avoid it.

Historical fact: people stopped being human in 1913. That was the year Henry Ford put his cars on rollers and made his workers adopt the speed of the assembly line. At first, workers rebelled. They quit in droves, unable to accustom their bodies to the new pace of the age. Since then, however, the adaptation has been passed down: we've all inherited it to some degree, so that we plug right into joysticks and remotes, to repetitive motions of a hundred kinds.

That's how people live, Milt...by telling stories. What's the first thing a kid says when he learns how to talk? 'Tell me a story.' That's how we understand who we are, where we come from. Stories are everything.

Five minutes old, and already the themes of my life—chance and sex—announced themselves.

Emotions, in my experience, aren't covered by single words. I don't believe in "sadness," "joy," or "regret." Maybe the best proof that the language is patriarchal is that it oversimplifies feeling. I'd like to have at my disposal complicated hybrid emotions.

I've never had the right words to describe my life, and now that I've entered my story, I need them more than ever. I can't just sit back and watch from a distance anymore. From here on in, everything I'll tell you is colored by the subjective experience of being part of events. Here's where my story splits, divides, undergoes meiosis. Already the world feels heavier, now I'm a part of it.

Whereas I, even now, persist in believing that these black marks on white paper bear the greatest significance, that if I keep writing I might be able to catch the rainbow of



consciousness in a jar. The only trust fund I have is this story, and unlike a prudent Wasp, I'm dipping into principal, spending it all.

My ecstatic intuition about myself was now deeply suppressed. How long I would have managed to keep it down is anybody's guess. But in the end it wasn't up to me. The big things never are. Birth, I mean, and death. And love. And what love bequeaths to us before we're born.

I hadn't gotten old enough yet to realize that living sends a person not into the future but back into the past, to childhood and before birth, finally, to commune with the dead. You get older, you puff on the stairs, you enter the body of your father. From there it's only a quick jump to your grandparents, and then before you know it you're time-traveling. In this life we grow backwards.

Stephanides, an American, grandchild of Greeks, admires this Turkish immigrant to Germany, this Gastarbeiter, as he bakes bread on Hauptstrasse here in the year 2001. We're all made up of many parts, other halves. Not just me.

Normality wasn't normal. It couldn't be. If normality were normal, everybody could leave it alone. They could sit back and let normality manifest itself. But people—and especially doctors—had doubts about normality. They weren't sure normality was up to the job. And so they felt inclined to give it a boost.

Nature brought no relief. Outside had ended. There was nowhere to go that wouldn't be me.

And in some houses people were getting old and sick and were dying, leaving others to grieve. It was happening all the time, unnoticed, and it was the thing that really mattered. What really mattered in life, what gave it weight, was death. Seen this way, my bodily metamorphosis was a small event.

I'm not sure, with a grandmother like mine, if you can ever become a true American in the sense of believing that life is about the pursuit of happiness. The lesson of Desdemona's suffering and rejection of life insisted that old age would not continue the manifold pleasures of youth but would instead be a long trial that slowly robbed life of even its smallest, simplest joys. Everyone struggles against despair, but it always wins in the end. It has to. It's the thing that lets us say goodbye.



Topics for Discussion

Topic 1

Compare and contrast the nature versus nurture of Cal's male gender identity. How is he genetically/inherently "male," and how has he been taught/taught himself to express his masculinity. Do you think he could have lived the rest of his life as a woman just as easily as a man? Why or why not? Be sure to support your argument with examples from the text.

Topic 2

Give two examples of when Cal's omniscience become limited and he cannot explain the thoughts or feelings of other characters. What narrative purpose does this serve? Do you find his omniscience believable or distracting, and why? Be sure to support your argument with examples from the text.

Topic 3

Cal is convinced his life is driven by chance, that it was "fated" that he be born a hermaphrodite. Compare and contrast the things Cal controls about his identity, and those he didn't or doesn't. Do you agree or disagree that his life has been left to chance, and why? Be sure to support your argument with examples from the text.

Topic 4

Compare and contrast the religious feelings of any two characters in the novel. Do you think any of the characters have genuine faith? Why or why not? Be sure to support your argument with examples from the text.

Topic 5

Discuss the importance of Detroit as the primary setting of the novel. Why does Eugenides spend so much time describing the historical context surrounding the events in the characters' lives? Do you think setting the story in a different American city would greatly change the narrative? Why or why not? Be sure to use examples from the text to support your argument.



Topic 6

Describe two important plot points that are revealed before the chronological point in the narrative at which they occur. What are the advantages and disadvantages of this circular form of storytelling? Would you rather only discover events as they occur? Why or why not? Be sure to use examples from the text to support your argument.

Topic 7

Discuss the theme of duality throughout the novel. Besides Cal's gender, give two examples of people who identify with more than one group. What are the advantages and disadvantages of having to navigate the world when caught between two opposing world views? Do you think Cal sees his dual gender as positive or negative? Be sure to use examples from the text to support your argument.

Topic 8

Describe one incident that Cal narrates in the present tense. What is the significance of this event? How does describing it in the present tense serve to enhance its meaning in the overall narrative structure? Be sure to use examples from the text to support your argument.