

The Memory of Old Jack Study Guide

The Memory of Old Jack by Wendell Berry

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Contents

The Memory of Old Jack Study Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Plot Summary.....	3
Chapter One, Light.....	5
Chapter Two, Ben.....	6
Chapter Three, Ruth.....	8
Chapter Four, Will Wells.....	10
Chapter Five, Hunger.....	12
Chapter Six, Rose.....	14
Chapter Seven, Through the Valley.....	15
Chapter Eight, Exile.....	17
Chapter Nine, Return and Chapter Ten, Mat.....	19
Chapter Eleven, Here We Leave Him to His Rest, Chapter Twelve, Wheeler, and Epilogue.....	21
Characters.....	23
Objects/Places.....	26
Themes.....	28
Style.....	30
Quotes.....	33
Topics for Discussion.....	35



Plot Summary

Jack spends a day in Port William, his home since birth, reflecting on his life, from the time he was a young boy born in the wake of the Civil War through an unhappy marriage to his final days as an old man who has been left behind by a society that has reinvented its values. Jack's first memories, which he recalls at the beginning of a new day, are of a young child in a family that had been torn apart by the Civil War. His two older brothers, whom he barely knew, had died, and his grief-stricken mother died before the war came to an end. His father, too, died a kind of spiritual death, and Jack was left to be raised by his older sister, Nancy, and her eventual husband Ben Feltner. Ben was everything Jack ever wanted to be, and even in his old age, Jack looked back on Ben as the model of manhood and strength.

From a young age, Jack developed a strong work ethic, in part because it allowed him an escape from his troubled household. His father died when he was still a young man and he inherited the farm. He took to caring for it with zeal and it almost became an extension of his being. As he grew older, he increasingly desired the companionship of a wife. He thought to find it in the beautiful Ruth and after a short courtship the two were married. Immediately, however, troubles began. Ruth saw Jack as a kind of project. She wanted him to be an upright, God-fearing, ambitious, wealthy man, and Jack was happy with what he had. Desperate to fulfill her expectations, or at least distract himself with more work, Jack bought more land and hired the help of a black man named Will Wells to tend to it. Before long, the inequity of the relationship between Jack and Will is too much for Jack to bear; Jack cannot stand knowing that all the work Will has put in is, ultimately, for Jack's gain. Without the help necessary to use the field it falls into disuse and Jack is forced to sell it, to the disappointment of his wife. There is now a division between them that will never be bridged, and they cease to have any substance to their marriage after the birth of their daughter, Clara, who Ruth jealously keeps away from Jack.

Jack's reverie is interrupted by a big dinner at the house of Mat Feltner, Ben's son, and the reader is given a picture of the quaint, though fading Southern culture. Most of the people there are quite old and Andy, the youngest, is headed away to college in the city, a sign of the decline of the South. Jack cannot remain long in the present, however, and after dinner he continues to recount his life.

Heartbroken and unhappy, Jack is swept up into an affair with the widow of a doctor's wife, Rose. For a while, their passionate romance is everything Jack had always wanted from Ruth, but when he sees that Ruth is hurt, guilt begins to overwhelm joy. Before he makes a decision to formally end his affair with Rose, she dies in a tragic accident while he is out of town on business. After that, Jack resigns himself to working on his farm, and with great pride is able to pay off the entire debt on the farm. Their daughter was growing up, however, and he had no rest from his work. His wife, whose own dreams had ended in disappointment, wanted to make sure the same did not happen to Clara, and the family scrounged for all the money they could to send her away to college. While there, she lost touch with much of her upbringing and Port William and shortly



after her graduation married a wealthy banker, Glad Pettit, and lived with him in a large house in Louisville. The Pettits would visit home frequently while Ruth still lived, but after her death their visits were rarer and motivated more by etiquette than any real bond.

Eventually, Jack became too old to live on his own, and at the urging of his friends, he decided to pass his final years living in the town's hotel. With no family around and no work, he lost himself to his memories, which is where the story finds him at its outset. Gazing out of his window over the land that taught him all of his values, Jack dies. He is given a simple burial—though, perhaps, not simple enough, in the eyes of those who knew him best—and the town returns to work. They do not forget, however, Old Jack, who for them stands as a symbol of the virtues of the way things used to be.



Chapter One, Light

Chapter One, Light Summary

Old Jack is standing on his porch listening to Mat call to his cows. He hears some wagons start to move in the distance and his mind is drawn back to the time when they were drawn by mules. He remembers a team of mules he bought when he was young, shortly after he took possession of his family's house. He was quite proud of them; they were expensive, but it was somewhat of a present to himself. The day after he brought them home, Ben Feltner and his son, Mat—then only five years old—came by. Ben married Jack's sister Nancy, who had been a kind of surrogate mother for Jack after his mom died when he was five. Though his father did not die until years later, Ben was also a kind of surrogate father for him. Jack, Ben, and Mat, after looking at Jack's new mules, went for a ride through the countryside. Jack is brought back, with disappointment, to the present and decides to go Jasper Lathrope's store.

Chapter One, Light Analysis

Old Jack, who is now in his nineties (the memory recounted in the chapter is sixty-four years ago and he was obviously a young adult in it), seems to be stuck in his past. He is described as having "light" and "music" in those days, a quality which he seems to have since lost. What is not yet clear is what was so much better about those days. It seems clear that he misses more than simply being young, but the scene recounted seems to be quite ordinary.



Chapter Two, Ben

Chapter Two, Ben Summary

Mat Feltner, now sixty-nine years old, goes into his house after some morning chores and sees Old Jack staring off of his hotel porch wistfully. Mat's wife, Margaret, suggests that Jack live with them, but Mat refuses, saying Jack would be offended and would not want to do it anyway, recalling that Jack has always been there for him when he needed it, but never when he did not.

Mat leaves the house and goes to meet one of his hired workers, a man named Lightning Berlew. Mat does not like Lightning or his wife, who goes by Smoothbore. They are not hard working people and have made no effort to integrate themselves into the community of Port Williams. Lightning and his wife had moved into the house of a black family that lived there and moved out after the death of the father, Joe. Mat had visited them once at their new home in Cincinnati, but their relationship had changed. Mat tells Lightning to take the tractor and wagon and help out some others and then Mat returns home. To his surprise, Jack is no longer on the porch.

He finds Jack at Jasper Lathrope's store, a place which serves as a kind of social center for Port Williams. As usual, Jack is swept away in his thoughts and does not immediately acknowledge that his nephew, Mat, has arrived. Jack is pulled out of his reverie when Mat puts his hand on his shoulder and invites him to have dinner with his family. Jack accepts, and almost immediately returns to his memories, which now feature his deceased wife, Ruth. His attention shifts, however, to Ben Feltner, Mat's father, and the role that Ben played in Jack's development as a boy and man.

Jack now digs even more deeply into his past. He recalls being very little and watching his older brothers go off to fight in the Civil War, never to return. His family had little stake in keeping the institution of slavery around, but they were passionate, nonetheless, to defend the South from what they saw as the undue infringement of the North. His mother was so heartbroken by the death of her sons that she stayed locked away in her room for days and died soon after and would not see the end of the war.

As Jack grew older, he became more and more interested in the outdoors and farming. His father would take Jack along with him everyday, but their relationship had changed after the death of Jack's brothers; his father had lost his confidence and sense of power, and was a poor father figure to his son.

When Jack was eight years old, Ben Feltner began courting his sister, Nancy, who had already in a way replaced his mother. Ben, too, would replace his father. Jack recalls the first time he met Ben. He had come by the house looking for Nancy and gave Jack a ride on his horse; immediately, Jack felt a sense of safety and comfort with him.



Chapter Two, Ben Analysis

This chapter gives more insight into Jack's upbringing. His family was torn apart by the Civil War and Jack, the youngest of the family, seems to have more or less been left on the wayside. His mother dies—a death presumably expedited by the grief of losing two sons—and his father feels powerless, whose will only weakens as the years go by. Nancy, his sister, and her eventual husband Ben, thus, filled the void and take care of Jack.

It is obvious Jack greatly admires Ben, and his reflective mood seems to be largely brought on by memories of him. Ben, evidently, had died some time ago; Jack mentions that Ben has been dead for forty-one years, which puts his death around 1914. Ben obviously is older than Jack—perhaps about ten years, or so—which means that Jack's last memories of Ben would be when Ben was in his sixties. Now in his nineties, Jack marvels at the fact that he is now old enough to have been Ben's father. Perhaps Jack still feels like he has not quite measured up to the model he had before him and even feels a bit lost without Ben's guidance. This feeling would also help explain Jack's memory in the first chapter, when he seemed to look back with longing for Ben's approval



Chapter Three, Ruth

Chapter Three, Ruth Summary

Jack's mind now turns to Ruth, and he knows he can do little to stop his reminiscences in his old age. He wishes his mind would settle down; there is no use in dredging through these old memories, especially the unpleasant ones, and for Jack, death is not far off anyway. He has a difficult time focusing on the present; however, in a way, he feels like he has already left the world. For some time, it seems, he has lived his life in the past, and even has an easier time remembering business figures from decades ago than figures that affect his business today. Jack has a brief interchange with Burley Coulter and decides to leave.

As he is walking, he recalls being a young man of twenty-eight. He was in charge of his family's farm and it began to become more and more meaningful to him. He worked tirelessly on the farm to get everything back into shape and to pay off his family's debts. The only time he allowed himself off was on Saturday night, when he would generally go to a dance or social gathering in the surrounding areas. Jack frequently let himself go morally and would overindulge in dancing, drinking, and women. When he would return, he would often be filled with anxiety, worried that something had gone wrong on the farm in his absence, and regret, if something had actually gone wrong. Regret, Jack reflects, is something which would haunt his entire life.

After his Saturday night extravaganzas, Jack would usually attend church services the next morning as a kind of atonement. As a young man, Jack was very confident; he felt in control of his life and the world seemed to be his for the taking. He generally did not pay much attention during church service and one day, while looking around the congregation, he noticed a woman he had never seen before whose beauty struck him. His attention to her was evidently obvious and gossip spread through the town over the next few weeks. Eventually, on the pretext of buying livestock from the family Ruth—the girl he was admiring—was staying with, he finally had a chance to meet and talk with her. Shortly after, a formal courtship started and they would get married.

However, even from the start, the foundation of their relationship was flawed. Jack's reputation for immoral behavior was well-known and Ruth was a very conservative, proper woman. She always looked down on him for it, and looked on him like a project. Though he gave some kind of superficial acceptance of this, in his heart he had no real intention of becoming the man she wanted him to be. She was also shocked by the kind of work in which he engaged. He had little help and therefore did all the dirty tasks around the farm himself; it disgusted Ruth and, in time, he started to disgust her, too. The unhappiness of their marriage only continued with the death of their only son.



Chapter Three, Ruth Analysis

While the first two chapters looked back on generally pleasant memories, this chapter is filled with regret and shame. Jack does not seem to regret the "extravagances" of his youth, however. He recognizes that he was a virile, good-looking young man and even seems to be proud of the questionable behavior he engaged in. If he regrets anything about his Saturday night adventures it was a lack of responsibility, but this seems almost overly-scrupulous. After all, by his own descriptions, he worked almost incessantly on his farm and it would seem perfectly reasonable to take a single night off for recreation.

At first glance, it might seem like Jack and Ruth have a kind of "love at first sight" moment in the church. He is instantly enraptured by her. It is important to notice, however, that while literary representations of beauty often put a great emphasis on physical beauty, Jack's attraction immediately has a carnal nature. Before he even sees her face, he is already marveling at her body and imagining what she looks like naked. When he does see her face, though it is pretty, it does not seem to fit her body: Her face is innocent and girlish; her body is sexy and womanly. Her face, perhaps, can be taken as a symbol of her personality and "inner beauty" and, for Jack, it pales in comparison to her external beauty.

Sexual desire seems to continue to motivate Jack throughout the courtship. Ruth's interest in Jack is to transform him from the immoral man she believes him to be into some kind of upright, virtuous man. Jack goes along with her intentions but really only superficially. He seems to be doing whatever he can to keep her interest, even though he surely realizes that the foundation for her attraction to him is not something that can sustain a marriage. He is not yet looking that far ahead, however; perhaps, he is only looking forward to the night of their wedding. As one might expect, the flimsy basis for the marriage quickly begins showing signs of stress.



Chapter Four, Will Wells

Chapter Four, Will Wells Summary

Jack enters a barbershop to rest awhile. His mind almost immediately goes back to his memories. When their son was born dead, he had entertained some hope that it would bring Ruth and him closer together, but it did not. He remembers, immediately after the birth, going into the room where she was laying. She lay there awake but acting like she was sleeping because she knew he was in the room. He made no attempt to wake her or console her and just built a fire and left. He would later look back on that moment with regret, wondering what might have happened if he had reached out to her.

Just as he had done as a child, he buried himself in his work to escape his domestic misery. He knew Ruth was disappointed with him. She had dreamed that she would marry a man who would be wealthy and successful, and realized that he was a man who was content simply with what he had. Yet, in some way, his desire to escape his life with work fulfilled her desire, and he started drawing up new plans to expand his farm and, for a time, it drew them closer. There was a plot of land—the Farrier place—which was connected to his property and he knew it would be for sale soon. This was a point of contention with a man named Sim McGrother, who was currently renting the land and hoped to buy it. To McGrother's displeasure, Jack would be successful in outbidding him for the land and took possession of the property.

He knew he could not work the land by himself, however, and so he hired on the help of a black man named Will Wells. Will and his family moved into a house in the Farrier place and for awhile he and Jack enjoyed a very good working relationship; in some ways, it was the closest relationship Jack had ever experienced. They did not share much about their personal lives, but each always had an almost instinctual knowledge of what the other was doing, and they could work together with little or no words exchanged. In time, however, the economic relationship between them began to bother Jack. He had always treated Will like an equal, but the reality that Will was not—the house Will was renovating and the life Will was building—was not his own, but Jack's. This divide would deepen and eventually explode into a violent conflict one day. Will had gotten a wagon stuck in some mud during a rain and Jack was obviously frustrated with him. This frustration climaxed with a physical fight and Will wound up punching Jack. Jack did not necessarily feel angry at him, though; he realized how unfortunate Will's situation was, and that he would have to lose everything he had built up on Jack's land.

Will left and Jack never hired another worker—something he mentions with some regret. The Farrier land fell into disuse, and he was eventually forced to sell it to McGrother for a substantial loss. The entire chain of events destroyed him emotionally and Ruth, now pregnant with their daughter, was very disappointed. When their daughter was born, Ruth told Jack she did not want to have sex anymore because she did not want another child. The distance between them continued to grow. Ruth barely let Jack see their baby and he began sleeping in a separate room in the house.



One day, discontent and drunk, he overheard McGrother laughing about Jack selling him the land. He confronted McGrother and tried to initiate a fight, but with no success. When Jack returned home, he found his barn on fire—unsure if this was an accident or McGrother's revenge. He lost the barn and many of his farm animals. He sank even further into depression and reluctantly went to Ben for a loan to rebuild his life.

Chapter Four, Will Wells Analysis

This chapter shows Jack regressing back to his childhood method of escaping a troubled domestic life: burying himself in work. His marriage is worse than ever, and so he simply tries to escape everything by giving himself no time to think. As a grown man, however, reality is not so easy to escape, and so he desperately tries to work harder. Perhaps to his surprise, his increased industry actually helps his marriage by revealing (at least to the reader) a hitherto unknown characteristic of his wife. Up until that point, Ruth has been presented as a dedicated Christian who just wants her husband to be a virtuous man. In addition to that, however, she wants a wealthy and successful husband, and part of her disappointment with Jack is that he seems content with his little farm. This attitude is hinted at in the previous chapter when she is disgusted by the fact that he is willing to do menial labor on the farm.

The main theme of this chapter, though, is economic. At first, the relationship between Will and Jack appears to be one of equals. They work together like they are partners and are able to manage a kind of superficial harmony. The fact that they are not partners, and never can be, drives a wedge between them. The relationship of employer and employee, of leaser and lessee is too much to overcome and leads ultimately to the end of their relationship. Though it is never said explicitly, it is reasonable to think this is why Jack never hires on another worker; he cannot endure to put another man through what Will endured. There is a bit of irony in this, however, since Will certainly preferred working there to not working anywhere.

Also of interest is Berry's presentation of race. Blacks in the book have so far been presented as simple, but good-hearted people. Economically, they always occupied an inferior role to whites, which is probably a reflection of the reality in the post-Civil War South. More importantly, all the sympathetic white characters in the book treat the black characters with respect and friendship: Mat even goes to visit Nettie in Cincinnati after she leaves Port William. On the other hand, the unsympathetic characters in the book—like Lightning and McGrother—are openly racist and are the only ones to ever use racial slurs (which one imagines might be more common in 19th century Kentucky).



Chapter Five, Hunger

Chapter Five, Hunger Summary

Hannah Coultner is preparing her children, Mattie and Margaret, for dinner at Mat Feltner's house (the same place Old Jack is going to dinner). She is the widow of Virgil Feltner, who died during World War II, and, though young, is already keenly familiar with death. She married Nathan Coultner and is pregnant with his second child (Mattie is their first). The Coultners' life is a kind of a work-in-progress and Hannah looks around at their property, seeing all their plans gradually come to fruition as time and money allow. Hannah packs the kids into their truck and drives to Mat's house. They are greeted by Margaret.

The meal is prepared quickly and while the children eat, Hannah goes out to find Old Jack, who has not yet showed up. After some searching, she finds him at the barbershop. Old Jack is very fond of Hannah and sees in her something which he wishes he had had in his life. After they arrive, everyone washes up and starts eating. The group converses casually about how everyone has been and what everyone is doing. Andy, a young man, is going off to the city to go to college, and people have mixed reactions. Some are happy, praising him for how smart he is. Others are a bit more skeptical, wondering whether going to the city will make Andy lose the common sense he learned in Port William.

After dinner, the men and most of the women have to go out into the fields and continue working. Jack can sense the dread in the air and it reminds him of his time as a horse breaker. A horse breaker is a person who tames a horse and makes it fit for whatever kind of work it is supposed to do. He was so good at it that he earned a solid reputation and actually saw a good amount of business doing it. The work was dangerous to do alone, but he did it anyway.

The men go to work and Jack is taken home. He fades once again into his memories and is reminded by the sound of a wagon of a fight he got into with Ruth. He had made the long trip into town to pick up groceries and she had forgotten to tell him they needed flour. Frustrated, he went once more to town to purchase it, only to find there was none to be bought. While in town, a storm had passed through and he knew the crops he had neglected in order to make this trip would be ruined. He tries to brave the storm, but his horses and wagon get swept up in a flooded part of the road. He manages to save himself and his horses, but everything else is lost.

Chapter Five, Hunger Analysis

This chapter is notable because it is the first chapter which spends most of its time narrating what is happening in the present. This would seem to indicate that what is going on around ninety-year-old Jack is more than a mere frame story for his memories.



For one, his relationship with Hannah seems to be quite significant to him. It is reasonable to think she reminds him of his wife in some way, even if it is by negation; that is, Hannah might appear to him as a symbol of marital happiness which he never had but always longed for.

It is worth briefly sorting out the relationships between all of the individuals at the dinner. Jack's most immediate relation is Mat Feltner, the son of his sister, Nancy, and Ben Feltner. Mat Feltner married Margaret and one of their sons was Virgil Feltner. Hannah married Virgil and they had "Little" Margaret. Virgil died in World War II and Hannah married Nathan Coulter. Together they had Mattie and have a third child on the way. Burley Coulter, Nathan's father, is there also. Lightning and Andy are there also and their relationship with the rest seems to be more related to work than direct family bonds.



Chapter Six, Rose

Chapter Six, Rose Summary

After leaving Mat Fetner's house, Jack finds a bench and goes back again to his memories. He remembers the story of the one woman he really ever felt loved by, Rose McInnis. When he first met her, she was married to an old doctor; their marriage was so strange that many of the people in town thought they were odd. Jack did not know her until he had an accident one day while working and cut his leg. He saw her only briefly, but she stayed in his mind.

A few years later, her husband died and she lived alone, still the butt of much gossip in the town for her strange ways. Jack would see her occasionally in town and there was a kind of unspoken attraction between them. Jack might have resisted her before, but after the accident in the flood, he decided to stop silencing his urges; he accepted his loveless, sexless marriage for what it was. In time, the silent attraction became more explicit and they started having an affair. They made little attempt to conceal it and the curious gossips in the town quickly spread word of it. Jack knew Ruth would find out, but he did not care; their relationship was so disintegrated that it would seem unreasonable for her to mind. When she found out, though, she was clearly hurt, and this affected Jack. The affair with Rose, which once was invigorating and uplifting, started to lose its magic for him. The attraction started to fade and Rose would tragically die one day, burned alive, when Jack was away selling his tobacco harvest.

Chapter Six, Rose Analysis

This chapter touches again on Jack's dissatisfaction with his marital life. He wants to have love and excitement, but he is lonely and neglected in his marriage with Ruth. Rose is a solution, but only a temporary one. No matter how happy Rose makes Jack feel, he cannot overcome the guilt he feels; at root he believes in the institution of marriage and, no matter how bad his marriage is, he feels obligated to fulfill his vows. This obligation is really only made apparent to him when he sees how hurt Ruth is by his adultery.

It is worth noting the structural similarities between Jack's relationship with Will Wells and his relationship with Rose. In both cases, the relationship begins very positively, but only because the rotten basis of it is ignored. In Will's case, they try to ignore the economic disparity between the two of them; in Rose's, the hurtful injustice of adultery is glossed over. When Jack realizes there is a problem, instead of either ending or trying to fix the relationship, he simply lets it die a slow, gradual, painful death. This shows that Jack has the type of personality which does not lend itself to directly confront problems or acknowledge, perhaps even to himself, that something is going wrong. Another of the example of this is his gradual neglect of the Farrier place before he is forced to sell it.



Chapter Seven, Through the Valley

Chapter Seven, Through the Valley Summary

Andy, a boy from a nearby town who has, in a way, been adopted by Port William, is preparing to go to college; it is his last day before he leaves. While he finishes his work, he contemplates the woods and streams that he became so familiar with in Port Williams; they are almost like a parent to him. After saying goodbye to his fellow workers, he stops by at Mat and Margaret Feltner's house. Margaret gives him some words of encouragement, urging him not to forget what he learned while in Port William. She also asks him to see Old Jack before leaving, and he does.

He finds Old Jack sitting on the porch of his hotel, lost in thought as usual. Old Jack does not recognize him until he says who he is, not because he does not know who Andy is, but because of Jack's old age and senility. Jack asks him a few questions—about what he plans on doing with his life, who he was working with, and so on—and the conversation comes to a lull. Andy begins thinking about his future with Kirby, his girlfriend. She, too, is going off to college, but she will be traveling to the East Coast. Kirby is a very different person from Andy and is enamored by urban, upper-class life. She also has less serious thoughts about their relationship; Andy seems to hope that it will survive the distance that will be between them, but she has her doubts. Andy gets up to go and says goodbye to Old Jack.

Jack's memory returns to where it left off. The years after Rose's death were passed in sadness and darkness; most of his time was dedicated to working to pay off the debts he had acquired on his farm. He recalls the day when he paid off the mortgage to the bank—he already paid off his debt to Ben. It was like the darkness on his life had been lifted and felt like a man just freed from a prison sentence. Ruth even shared in some of his renewed happiness, though he realized it was too late for their marriage to ever really be mended.

Ben was happy for him when he paid off his debt, and though Jack was not open about his feelings with him, Ben knew on some level what it meant to him. Not long afterward, however, Ben would be murdered—shot down—by one of his friends. Mat was all he left behind, and it was the moment which showed whether Mat had grown into a man worthy of his father, and in Jack's mind, he had.

Chapter Seven, Through the Valley Analysis

This chapter provides a sharp contrast not only between the persons of Andy and Jack, but between the past and future of Port William. Jack is a kind of ghost of times past, still lingering around in a town he really does not belong to anymore. Andy, on the other hand, is out of place in his own way, because all the signs point towards Port William diminishing. The economic trend has been towards the city and away from the

countryside, and Andy is the first—perhaps of many—to leave the town for greater opportunity elsewhere. He tells Jack he wants to be a farmer, but he does not even believe it; perhaps he is just telling Jack that to make him happy, since no one would be more upset to see Port William start to diminish than would Jack. Nevertheless, Andy certainly owes a debt to Port William. He recounts, with pleasure and tranquility, his adventures through the wilderness and even cherishes the hard work that he went through. The town is a kind of mother to him and he is constantly reminded by his elders to never forget the wisdom he has learned while there.



Chapter Eight, Exile

Chapter Eight, Exile Summary

Jack goes inside the hotel to eat dinner. He reflects on his relationship with his daughter, Clara. She had always been Ruth's daughter; he had merely been there to provide money for her. He had sacrificed a lot for her so she could go to college and live up to the ambitions that Ruth had never fulfilled for herself but transferred to her daughter. After going to college, Clara never felt at home in Port William again. She visited her friends who were scattered around the country and wound up marrying a man named Glad Pettit, a young man who was already quite wealthy and had a promising future in banking. Clara and Glad would visit Jack and Ruth frequently, but he never developed more than a superficial relationship with Glad; he knew Glad really had no interest in his way of life.

One day, when Jack was seventy-five and Ruth was sixty-four, after a long day of plowing, he came inside to find Ruth struggling to breathe. She had suffered a heart attack. He went into town and found the doctor. Clara had been called and arrived with an ambulance which took Ruth away to their house in Louisville. She stayed there while she died and Jack visited weekly. After her death, the lack of a relationship with Clara became obvious; the only thing that connected them was Ruth. Now that she was gone, Clara's visits were mere formalities. Jack, worried about what would happen to his farm after he died, started drawing up hopeful plans that Glad and Clara would take it over. When he told Glad of the plans, they were met with only superficial approval, and Jack realized they would never live in Port William.

As Jack aged, his friends and family became more and more concerned about him living on his own. Finally, he agreed to rent out the farm and move into town to live in the hotel. With nothing left to occupy him—he had no family left and he could no longer bury himself in work—Jack became absorbed in a kind of dream world where he relived the past over and over.

The woman who runs the hotel, seeing that he is eating dinner, asks if he would like to watch TV. He declines—TV is a modern annoyance to him—and goes up to his bedroom.

Chapter Eight, Exile Analysis

This chapter finishes the theme which has been building throughout the book: Port William, and the old-fashioned, agrarian lifestyle it represents, is on its way out. That simple way of life is no longer sufficient for modern man. This is perhaps represented most strongly in what happens to his farm and what happens to Clara. Clara becomes a city-person when she marries Glad and has no desire to really be a part of Port William.



Jack has a very definite idea about what this new mindset is: the desire for wealth. Glad's job could not be more symbolic: a banker. Jack says that Glad has no interest in buying land in Port William because he knows he cannot buy it and then resell it for a profit. In the new modern world, everything has a price and nothing is sacred. This reflection may also shed some light on the difference between him and Ruth. Ruth was always ambitious and was certainly pleased with how Clara turned out. Jack, on the other hand, was a man satisfied with what he had. The only time he wanted more was his brief attempt to expand his farm, and he saw it winding up in the exploitation of another man. Presumably, in the new world, such exploitation is acknowledged and accepted.



Chapter Nine, Return and Chapter Ten, Mat

Chapter Nine, Return and Chapter Ten, Mat Summary

Chapter Nine: Return

In Chapter Nine, Jack continues his way up to his room and, worn out, sits down in his chair. He looks out the window and his mind goes to the fields and woods he gazes out at.

Chapter Ten: Mat

In Chapter Ten, Mat, after hearing that Jack has not shown up for normal morning routine, goes to the hotel and finds Jack sitting in his chair, dead. As a close friend of Jack's for over sixty-years, he naturally feels some grief, but he also feels relief, knowing that it was Jack's time to go. He goes home and starts getting everything prepared for his burial. He makes sure everything is simple, because he knows that is how Jack would want it: the cheapest coffin and a service which consisted of only a few short readings from the Bible.

The coffin—too fancy, in Mat's opinion—is set up in the Feltner's house and people from the town and Clara and Glad come to pay their respects. People linger for sometime before gradually trickling out. Mat, with an unusual amount of energy since he did not work that day, stays up all night, thinking about his old friend. The next day, after working, he goes to his backyard to rest and contemplate his dead friend in silence. The silence does not last long, however; he is interrupted by Lightning and his wife who are working, as always, on their beat up car. Mat realizes that, essentially, there is no difference between Lightning and the Pettits. They both want the same thing—to amass wealth for as little effort as possible—and the Pettits just happened to be successful.

Mat considers what kind of burial Jack would have wanted: To just be buried anonymously in his field, his location kept a secret by his few close friends and relatives and to be totally forgotten once they died. Unfortunately, the time has come for his proper burial service, and Jack cannot have what he wants.

Chapter Nine, Return and Chapter Ten, Mat Analysis

Though, technically, only one day of Jack's life has been narrated, his death comes after the reader has learned about his entire life; it caps off the epic story of a simple man who struggled through life in many ways, but ultimately was content with what he had.

Jack, evidently, is not the only one who missed how things used to be. Mat, too, longs for the days when people were not so eager to collect as much money as they could.



This greed, he realizes, is destroying his community and everything he loves. He tries to do his part—perhaps, vainly, unfortunately—by relating a simple allegory to Mattie. He tells him the story of some rabbit hunters who lost what they had because they wanted too many rabbits; they were not content with the few rabbits they could easily catch. The moral of this story is the same as the moral of the story of Jack's life: One is not made happier by acquiring more and more things; one is happier by loving and accepting what one has. Though surely restrained by their ties to his own family and to Jack, Mat cannot help being disgusted by the acquisitiveness of the Pettits.

The new generation does not have the same bond with the land that Jack and Mat's generation had. They see land as a commodity to be bought, sold, and traded as was financially convenient. The wisdom of Port William—and, thus, agrarian America as a whole—is that the land is a kind of mother to be revered, respected, and, above all, never abandoned. Jack's ideal burial, then, is to return to the land which, so to speak, gave birth to him.



Chapter Eleven, Here We Leave Him to His Rest, Chapter Twelve, Wheeler, and Epilogue

Chapter Eleven, Here We Leave Him to His Rest, Chapter Twelve, Wheeler, and Epilogue Summary

Chapter Eleven: Here We Leave Him to His Rest

In Chapter Eleven, Jack is buried. Mat is annoyed that the preacher does not listen to his request to give him a simple service and just read the Psalms he had asked. Instead, the preacher gives a lengthy concluding prayer which Mat thinks is too ornate for simple Jack. After the service, he watches the Pettits leave, realizing they will never return to Port William.

Chapter Twelve: Wheeler

In Chapter Twelve, Wheeler, Jack's lawyer, pays a visit to Jack's old farm. Wheeler has been working as a legal advocate for the small farmer and, as such, has had to spend more time away from the country than he would like. He has come to inform Elton, Jack's tenant, that Jack wanted him to buy it from him after his death and he even offered to pay half of the price for him. Elton gladly accepts and quickly gets back to work. Wheeler lingers at the farm a little longer and goes into one of the sheds. There he finds unmistakable signs of Jack, even though he has been away from the farm for so long: miscellaneous pieces of farm equipment hung up, in case they one day would come in handy and a poster of Franklin Roosevelt, one of Jack's personal heroes. Wheeler thinks to take the poster as a memento of Jack, but decides to leave it to remain with the house.

Epilogue

In the epilogue, the men of Port William are gathered in December of the same year at Jack's farm, which will soon be Elton's. They all fondly recall Jack through his various idiosyncrasies and sayings, remembering a man that they will forever miss.

Chapter Eleven, Here We Leave Him to His Rest, Chapter Twelve, Wheeler, and Epilogue Analysis

Thematically, these chapters repeat the major theme of the book: the contrast between the hard-working, humble, and yet rewarding agrarian lifestyle to the peaceless, greedy urban lifestyle. Chapter Twelve brings a new twist on it, though, in the form of political activism. That Wheeler is a lawyer has been known throughout the book, but it is not



until the end that it is revealed that he has been an active political advocate trying to save the small farms from extinction. It seems obvious that Wheeler is a kind of embodiment of the author's own political feelings. Economics seem to have dictated that the small farm disappear and that urban life dominate America and, Berry thinks, if nothing is done to save the farms, then, like Old Jack, they will fade away, and with them a piece of America.



Characters

Jack Beechum

Jack Beechum, known in his later years simply as Old Jack, is a man who lived his entire life in the small Kentucky town of Port William. He was born into a nation sharply divided by the Civil War, and his two older brothers gave their lives to fight for the South. Their deaths would break his mother's heart and she would die soon after, while his father lost all sense of direction and power. He was raised instead by Nancy, his older sister, and her suitor and eventual husband, Ben Feltner. From an early age, Jack found work to be an escape from his troubles and dedicated himself to it. His dedication was magnified after his father passed and the family farm became his. He worked tirelessly to keep it in good condition and to pay off the debts his father had accumulated on it.

As he grew older, he sought the companionship of women, and in the course of doing so, developed somewhat of a reputation for immorality. When he met Ruth, his eventual wife, she saw him as a project for changing. She wanted a husband that was upright and ambitious. When they married, he was neither, and, to her disappointment, he never would be. Ruth bore him two children: a son, who was born dead, and a daughter, Clara. After the birth of Clara, Ruth receded from him even more, and she would hardly even allow him to see his child. He sought companionship in an affair with Rose McInnis, but eventually guilt caught up to him. Rose died in a fire accident before he could end the affair formally, however.

After Rose's death, Jack gave up on his broken heart and dedicated himself fully to his work. With great pride, he managed to pay off all of the debts on his farm and became more and more attached to his land. When Ruth died, his already flimsy relationship with his daughter, now married to a rich banker in Louisville, weakened even more. Advanced in years, he moved off his farm to live in a hotel. With nothing left to do, Jack became what he is in the story: a man lost in his memories. He dies a peaceful death looking over the moonlit landscape of Port William.

Mat Feltner

Mat Feltner is Jack's nephew, the son of Nancy and Mat Feltner. He is Jack's good friend his entire life and they are friends for over seventy years. No small part of Jack's affection for Mat comes from his similarity to his father, Ben, who was a kind of surrogate father to Jack and his lifelong hero. Jack saw in Mat the same masculine independence and dedication to work that he admired in Ben. After Ben's murder, Jack comes to respect Mat even more, because he can see the strength it required for Mat to live without his father.

In Jack's old age, Mat is the one who is most attentive to him. It is at Mat's urgings that Jack agrees to leave his farm and live in the hotel. Mat is the one who searches around



the town for Jack to invite him to dinner. When Jack dies, Mat is the one who finds him sitting peacefully in his room.

However, Mat's opinion of Jack is most clearly seen when he takes charge of funeral proceedings for him. Mat knows Jack well and knows that Jack would want the plainest, most inexpensive ceremony possible. In fact, though he knows it is impossible, he would like to have Jack simply stuffed away in the dirt of his farm and forgotten. Mat knows that Jack's passing away is symbolic of the economic and political changes the country is going through, which make no room for the simple life of a rural farmer.

Ben Feltner

Ben Feltner is the husband of Jack's sister Nancy. After Jack's father is crushed by the death of his sons, Ben informally assumes the role of raising Jack.

Nancy Beechum / Feltner

Nancy Beechum is Jack's older sister, and the only sister who is still around when he is born. After the death of their mother, she essentially fills that role for Jack.

Ruth Beechum

Ruth is Jack's wife. Jack first meets her at church and is more impressed by her physical beauty than anything else. For her part, she sees Jack as a man she hopes to mold to her liking and does not truly love him for what he is. Their marriage ends in disappointment for her, however, as he never grows into the man she wants him to be.

McGrother

McGrother is a landowner who competes with Jack over ownership of the Farrier place. After he is forced to sell the land to McGrother, Jack hears McGrother laughing about his misfortune. He tries to start a fight with him, but McGrother will not indulge him.

Will Wells

Will Wells is a black man Jack hired on to help him take care of the Farrier place. Though initially they have a solid, respectful working relationship, the economic reality that Will is not working for his own permanent gain is too much for Jack to bear.



Rose McInnis

Rose McInnis is the widow of the town doctor. In the midst of his miserable marriage, Jack gets involved in an adulterous affair with her. Initially, Jack is excited and filled with joy, but guilt wins out. Rose is killed in a fire accident while Jack is away selling his crop.

Clara Beechum / Pettit

Clara is the daughter of Jack and Ruth, their only child to survive birth. Ruth keeps Clara away from Jack as much as possible. Clara goes away to college and loses touch with her Port William upbringing. She marries Glad Pettit and absorbs all his bourgeois values.

Andy Catlett

Andy Catlett is a young man who is about to go off to college. He represents the uncertain future of Port William, as many fear he will lose touch with his agrarian roots when he goes away to a big city.

Wheeler Catlett

Wheeler Catlett is the father of Andy Catlett and the only lawyer for Port William. In addition to taking care of the various legal needs, like wills, for the town, he is also a political advocate for small farmers.

Glad Pettit

Glad Pettit is a wealthy Louisville banker who marries Clara Beechum. He has no respect for the agrarian lifestyle of Port William and represents the changing direction of America.

Hannah Coulter

Hannah Coulter is a young woman who is married to Nathan Coulter. She is the widow of Virgil Feltner, one of Mat Feltner's sons. To Jack, she represents the kind of domestic happiness that he never knew with Ruth.



Objects/Places

Port William

Port William is the small Kentucky town where Jack has lived all of his life.

The Beechum Farm

The Beechum Farm is the farm Jack inherited from his father and represents his life's work. He is saddened that his daughter does not want to take care of it, but passes it on to Elton.

Farrier Place

The Farrier place is a plot of land that adjoins the Beechum farm that Jack buys when he is planning on expanding his property. He has to sell it at a loss, however, when he is unable to keep it up.

Louisville

Louisville is the city Clara moves to with her husband, Glad.

Jasper's Shop

Jasper's grocery store is a kind of social center for the town.

Hargrave

Hargrave is another Kentucky town which is in the center of the county Port William. It is somewhat larger than Port William.

The Civil War

The Civil War devastated the Beechum family, perhaps symbolic of the distress it caused the South.

Tobacco

Tobacco is the primary crop of Port William.

Tractors

Tractors replaced mules in agricultural work and are one of many symbols of the changing economic times in Port William.

Church

Church is where Jack meets Ruth and is a kind of center for social interaction in Port William.



Themes

The Fading of Agrarian America

The central theme of the novel is that from the time after the Civil War to the time following World War II, America steadily moved away from its agrarian roots to a society that was centered around cities. Jack's own life is a symbol of this change. He is a virile young man growing up, but his ways become increasingly unsatisfactory as time goes on. His wife, Ruth, wants him to be an ambitious, successful man, and she does not seem to particularly care how he does it. When he fails to meet her expectations, their marriage is basically ruined. Ruth's attitude, which she transmits to her daughter, Clara, is the new mindset which engulfs America. Under this new mindset, one only cares about making more money and having more possessions. Gone are the humble days of being content with one's (literal) lot in life.

The change is not simply an economic one, however. The fading away of the small farmer is also the fading away of a set of values which Berry sees as fundamental to the American spirit. He does not see America's roots in the capitalistic, greed-driven lifestyle that develops after the Great Depression. Americans cease to want to work hard for what they have. Instead, like Lightning Berlew, they want to live extravagant lives without doing anything.

Land Ownership and Economic Justice

Pride in one's labor is one of Jack's fundamental values throughout this novel. The moment he is an adult in possession of his own farm, Jack's land almost becomes an extension of his being and he pays perhaps even excessive attention to it, scolding himself for taking even a single night off. What makes his labor worth it is that he is improving his land, and therefore, he is improving himself. The same cannot be said, unfortunately, for Will Wells. He hires Will Wells on as a worker to help take care of his new plot of land, Farrier place. He watches with sadness as Will renovates the house and improves the land, knowing that Will really cannot see any permanent fruit from his labor: Will will move on and leave all his hard work behind. This inequity is so unsettling to Jack that it ruins his relationship with Will and the two wind up violently parting ways.

The inequity between Jack and Will should be seen as symbolic of a larger economic problem. The trend during this period in American history is towards corporate farming and away from small farm owners who work their own land. A direct result is that thousands will put their labor into this land see only meager wages in return. This is but one of many reasons why Berry advocates political protection of the small farmer, through the person of Wheeler, in the last chapter of the book.



Race in the Post-Bellum South

In many ways, Berry's depiction of blacks in the South can be seen straddling the older, racist attitudes of the South and the more progressive attitudes of the modern era. On the one hand, the few black characters in this book are always represented positively. The Binion family is sorely missed after they leave and their white replacements are despised. Will Wells is a hard worker who Jack is able to have a kind of bond with that he can never quite replicate. The fact that blacks are always in inferior economic positions should not be held against Berry; this is probably a realistic representation of life in the South during this period.

However, Berry's depictions are not totally progressive. For one, the black characters in the novel, while good-hearted, are simple and perhaps a little stupid. They always talk with poor grammar and an exaggerated Southern dialect, even though the white characters generally speak proper English. It might be argued that this is simply a reflection of their poor education, but this explanation is not sufficient. First, many of the white characters, the reader is told, had little or no education themselves. Second, depicting the black characters in this way will inevitably give the reader the impression that they are simply of inferior intelligence, an effect of which Berry was surely aware.

Style

Point of View

The story is told from the third-person perspective in the present tense. Though the majority of the story follows Jack through his last day alive, it is necessary for it to be told by a third-person to allow for the narration of his burial. Naturally, whenever Jack is recalling some of his memories, the knowledge of the narrator is limited exclusively to what Jack knew.

The story is less consistent with its use of the present tense. Though events that occur during the day in the "present" of the story are always narrated in the present tense, Jack's memories occasionally slip between the use of the past and present tense. The effect of this is obvious: Jack himself has a difficult time distinguishing past from present. In his dream-like final day, he has a hard time keeping his memories separate from his current experience, nor does he seem to particularly want to keep them separate.

Setting

With a few insignificant exceptions, the entire story, his memories included, takes place in the fictional Kentucky town of Port William. It is a small town which is entirely dependent on tobacco farming. It can be taken as a symbol of "small town America" in general, and thus its diminishing is representative of an overall shift in American social organization.

The citizens of Port William have an almost filial relationship with the city. Andy, one of the youngest residents mentioned in the book, looks at the town and the land as a kind of mother to him. Jack dies in peace looking over the moonlit landscape of the town he called home his entire life, and recalls with regret that his daughter wanted nothing more to do with the town. It is significant that Ruth, his wife, whose ambitions are so great and unlike him does not appear to be a native of Port William, but an outsider. Port William, it seems, would not raise such a person.

The decline of Port William is symbolized by the fact that it missed the railroad. In an increasingly industrial America, to be disconnected from the railroad meant to be disconnected from the rest of America. People had become too busy—or perhaps too lazy—to travel by the old-fashioned methods of the horse and wagon, and thus being off the transportation grid was as good as being off the map.

Language and Meaning

Berry's writing style is plain and simple, perhaps fitting to describe the plain and simple lives of the residents of Port William. His sentences tend to be short and economical,



rarely using high-level vocabulary, and only when absolutely necessary. The effect of this is to make the author as transparent as possible and to convey as "directly" as possible the story of Jack and those around him.

When Jack is recounting his memories, the narration, naturally enough, perhaps, assumes some of Jack's judgments and beliefs. For example, when Jack is recounting the memories of his youthful days, the narrator writes: "Oh, he was something to look at then!" There is no explicit qualification that this was Jack's belief or feeling. Rather, there is a seamless and unannounced transition between the objective, third-person narrator and the subjective realm of Jack's memories. This is perhaps stylistically wise, as constant qualifications and attributions in the text could become burdensome to the reader. More importantly, however, it shows that Jack's visions are colored by his judgments; it is impossible to separate the reality he experienced from the judgments and feelings with which he experienced it.

Structure

The novel is divided into twelve chapters and an epilogue. Excluding the first chapter, which is a brief introduction to the book and sets the tone thematically, and the chapters after Jack dies, the chapters chronologically depict his life from youth to senility.

Chapter One begins with Jack on his hotel porch, reminiscing vaguely about his past and a scene from his boyhood with Ben Feltner, Jack's father figure while Jack is growing up and his role model throughout his entire life. Chapter Two backtracks and explains his birth into a family that was being drawn into the Civil War and how it tore apart his family. Instead of his biological parents, he was raised by his sister and her boyfriend and eventual husband, Ben Feltner.

Chapter Three depicts Jack as a young man growing into the responsibilities of owning a farm and marrying Ruth. Their marriage is unhappy because Ruth wanted him to be a more ambitious man than he was by nature. Chapter Four recounts his attempt to conform to what she wanted by buying the Farrier place and hiring Will Wells. Unable to stand the economic inequity of the situation, he disappoints her and sells the Farrier place.

Chapter Five is unusual in that it is the first chapter which predominantly takes place in the present, narrating the dinner Jack and his friends have together. It ends with a brief story of Jack getting into a wagon accident in a flood. This leads into his affair with Rose, recounted in Chapter Six, which ends in more heartbreak and grief for Jack. In Chapter Seven, he is a man resigned to living without romance and dedicates himself entirely to working his land. Also in this chapter, he talks with Andy, who is about to leave Port William and go off to college. Chapter Eight tells of the end of his life: Clara's marriage and departure for Louisville and Ruth's death. He has little left at this point and decides to move into the hotel, at the urging of his friends. In Chapter Nine, Jack goes into his room and dies.



Chapter Ten and Chapter Eleven describe the mourning of his friends and his modest funeral service. In Chapter Twelve, Wheeler, the town lawyer, visits Jack's old farm and tells Elton, the current tenant, that Jack wants him to own it. It is also notable because it contains a thinly-veiled political call to action on behalf of small farmers. The epilogue is a thematic summary of the book, as the men of the town recall Jack and the values for which he stood.



Quotes

"Though he stands leaning on his cane on the porch of the hotel in Port William, looking out into the first cool morning of September, 1952, he is not there. He is four miles and sixty-four years away, in the time when he had music in him and he was light." (7)

"Lightning will not take the hog. Mat knows that. Then why did he ask? Because it is right? To walk the second mile? Maybe. But maybe, too, for some perverse fascination in seeing the man so steadfastly prove himself a fool." (13)

"The few mornings when he returned to find that something in fact had gone wrong, he knew the anger of regret for which he could find not fitting act. Though he did not know it then, it was an emotion that would be one of the powerful themes of his life." (31)

"And so when he became her suitor and then her husband, Jack did not exactly occupy a vacancy; he usurped the place of some well-educated young minister of lawyer or doctor whose face and name were perhaps not yet known to the mother and daughter but whose place had nevertheless been appointed. It was this hypothetical and shadowy figure that she held up to Jack as a standard." (42)

"He went back to the barn and hitched up his mules and worked through the afternoon. But now he was changed. The Farrier place had changed him. His trip over there that day had formalized a sort of betrothal; it had joined his vision to his will." (55)

"That understanding of mortality has been Hannah Coulter's great suffering, as now it is her peculiar gift; she has known and borne and accepted it upon the terms of her womanhood and her flesh." (72)

"Lightning is at work now with a comb, putting the finishing touches to his wave and ducktail, a sculpture not destined to survive the next motion of his head. There is an arrogance in his eye and jaw and the line of his mouth, based not upon any excellence of his own but upon his contempt for excellence: if he is not the best man in the field, then he is nevertheless equal to the best man by the perfection of his scorn, for the best man and for the possibility that is incarnate in him." (83)

"They waited, he waited, perhaps because of a sense of what a powerful thing, between them, speech would finally be. Their first words, he knew, would change them and change their world." (99)

"He lost his life—fifteen years that he had thought would be, and ought to have been, the best and the most abundant; those are gone from the earth, lost in disappointment and grief and darkness and work without hope, and now he is only where he was when he began." (122)



"At about the same time he also withdrew, bluntly and finally, from all other relationships that had no meaning to him. He granted no more worth to mere formality or blood tie; he would no longer stir a foot for old time's sake." (139)

"His fields drowse and stir like sleepers, borne toward morning. . . . Now they break free of his demanding and his praise. He feels them loosen from him and go on." (146)

"They know that his memory holds them in common knowledge and common loss. The like of him will not soon live again in this world, and they will not forget him." (170)



Topics for Discussion

What about the first memory Jack recalls in Chapter One makes him think his life was full of "light and music"?

Describe the nature of Jack's initial attraction to Ruth. What did he want in her as a wife?

What about the economic relationship between Jack and Will made Jack upset?

Why did Jack's pity for Will's economic situation lead to a fight between them?

Why did Jack decide to buy and work the Farrier place?

What is the significance of Chapter Five: Hunger? What is the relevance of the dinner scene?

In what way are the Hurlaws and the Pettits the same kind of people?

In chapter twelve, Wheeler says Franklin Roosevelt was one of Jack's heroes, yet the years of Roosevelt's administration are largely skipped over in Jack's memories. Why?