

Naked Lunch Study Guide

Naked Lunch by William S. Burroughs

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Contents

Naked Lunch Study Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Plot Summary.....	4
Chapter 1.....	5
Chapter 2.....	7
Chapter 3.....	8
Chapter 4.....	9
Chapter 5.....	10
Chapter 6.....	11
Chapter 7.....	12
Chapter 8.....	13
Chapter 9.....	14
Chapter 10.....	15
Chapter 11.....	16
Chapter 12.....	17
Chapter 13.....	18
Chapter 14.....	19
Chapter 15.....	20
Chapter 16.....	21
Chapter 17.....	22
Chapter 18.....	23
Chapters 19, 20, 21 and 22.....	24
Chapter 23.....	25
Chapters 24 and 25.....	26
Characters.....	27



Objects/Places..... 30

Social Sensitivity..... 33

Techniques/Literary Precedents..... 34

Themes..... 36

Style..... 39

Quotes..... 41

Adaptations..... 45

Key Questions..... 47

Topics for Discussion..... 49

Related Titles..... 50

Copyright Information..... 51



Plot Summary

In a convoluted and disturbing string of events, a drug addict flees from the police. His journeys take him across the United States and down into Mexico and beyond. On his travels, he meets up with various members of the underground drug and homosexual cultures. Alongside the twisted narrative runs a counter story about the uses of mind control by governments and psychiatrists to manipulate, destroy and direct the masses. Told in lurid detail that disturbs and disgusts many readers, the novel presents a glimpse into the emerging counter cultures of the 1950s and gives interesting insights into how these forces effect the ongoing development of modern society.

The novel begins as Lee, a drug dealer and addict, flees arrest. He sets out across the country with several of his friends. Overtime, the group splits apart and Lee continues on his way to Mexico and down through Central and South America. At every location, Lee is involved with the local drug culture, including getting prescriptions from local doctors to fill his drug supply. Lee meets and interacts with other drug dealers, who he calls agents.

During Lee's journey he observes the populations of three fictional locations. The first is Annexia, which has a system of random bureaucracy that keeps its population in fear of arbitrary punishment. The second is Freeland, run by sadistic Dr. Benway. The third is Interzone, which centers on a common Market where all types of drugs and sexual favors are on sale. At each of these locations, many types of deviant behavior are shown as normal and commonplace, including sexual acts with young children.

Much of the novel takes places in imaginary zones, possibly hallucinations by the drug addicted narrator or imaginative descriptions of real events and people encountered by the author in his travels around the world. In these instances, archetypal characters are introduced to stand in for various types of political and social roles and movements. There is an emphasis on the field of psychiatry and the various inhuman manipulations by psychiatrists on patients in the name of research to better humanity. These chemical interactions are often contrasted to the illegal drugs that the narrator and his fellow agents deal with.

At many points in the novel, the drug abuse takes a back seat to the various types of homosexual behavior on display. There are many nightclubs and social places where groups of people congregate to find sexual partners for homosexual acts that are often accompanied by violence. These places exist in the fantasy realm rather than that of reality, as the narrator stresses that homosexuality is not accepted by his own society and that his connections with homosexuality guarantee him stronger punishment than dealing drugs.



Chapter 1

Chapter 1 Summary

In a convoluted and disturbing string of events, a drug addict flees from the police. His journeys take him across the United States and down into Mexico and beyond. On his travels, he meets up with various members of the underground drug and homosexual cultures. Alongside the twisted narrative runs a counter story about the uses of mind control by governments and psychiatrists to manipulate, destroy, and direct the masses. Told in lurid detail that disturbs and disgusts many readers, the novel presents a glimpse into the emerging counter cultures of the 1950s and gives interesting insights into how these forces effect the ongoing development of modern society.

The narrator is a mid level drug addict and dealer. He notices that a man in a white trench coat is following him and assumes that he is a police officer about to arrest him. To avoid arrest, the narrator throws away his drug paraphernalia and runs into a subway station. On the train, the narrator analyzes the various personality types present and separates them according to their connection to drug addiction and the underworld of drug dealers.

For the most part, the narrator dismisses the other people on the train as being unknowledgeable about the drug world. At the same time, however, he assumes that they all recognize that he does belong to the drug world and that they all want to show that they understand this world, when they really do not. The narrator is nervous about being arrested, because he fears that his clients will tell the police about his homosexual behavior, which he assumes will get him a harsher punishment than his life as a junkie and drug dealer. He decides that he needs to leave town immediately.

Chapter 1 Analysis

The novel opens with some of the most lucid sections of the novel. Here is a clear plot structure, though the reader will not be aware of why Lee is running away until the end of the novel. Unlike later sections of the book, this opening chapter follows a traditional plot structure in which events are described in time order. In this way, the novel is able to establish some connection to the "real" world during the brief moments, when the narrator feels that connection. As the narrator moves away into more fantasy filled worlds, this plot structure also falls away, only to return when, once again, Lee is confronted by the "real" world.

The underlying themes of the novel are presented here. First of all, Lee makes clear distinctions between himself and those on the subway train. He looks down on them, because they do not know anything about the drug subculture but pretend to in order to seem modern and knowledgeable. Here Lee draws clear lines between "normal" society and the world that he lives in. At later parts of the novel, the narrator will recreate a

different standard of "normal" through his various fantasy locations in which drugs and homosexuality are treated as commonplace.



Chapter 2

Chapter 2 Summary

The man known as the Vigilante is introduced, not so much by his drug addiction but by how it makes him behave. His early behavior involves shooting wildly with his gun. In this section, he is described as though he is in a courtroom. His defense of his actions is his drug addiction and, for this reason, he is sent to a federal psychiatric hospital for lifelong treatment. The difference in his demeanor and appearance are shown to contrast the user from the addict that has been kept from access to his drugs.

The Vigilante has put on a lot of weight during his lockup, though the narrator assures the reader that the new weight drops off almost instantly, when someone begins using drugs again. The narrator goes into further descriptions of the physical changes that affect people, both as they become addicts and as they go through enforced periods where they do not have access to drugs. Often the narrator comments on how the essential humanity of a person is lost during both the using of drugs and the forced rehabilitation.

Chapter 2 Analysis

The Vigilante is used to provide commentary on the lifestyle of the drug addict and the ways that their habits show in their lives. In this case, the Vigilante's weight is used to show his connection to drugs. When he is thin, it means that he has a supply of drugs. When he is heavy, it is because he has been deprived of drugs. Part of this description also includes what will be a constant feature in the narrator's visualization of drug addiction. The Vigilante, when under the influence or when deprived, loses much of this essential humanity. He is not recognizable as having the same needs and wants as other people, setting him apart as inhuman.

Chapter 3

Chapter 3 Summary

The narrator sets out on a cross - country trip with several of his friends. The Rube gets the whole group caught by the police. The narrator is angry at this turn of events and gives the Rube an overdose in prison in order to kill him and leave him there. The remaining group drives through the Midwest, changing cars at various points until they reach Mexico. The narrator discusses Bradley the Buyer, who deals drugs but does not use them. The Buyer gets a contact high from his various clients and is involved in the disappearances of some law enforcement officials, though nothing can be proved.

In Mexico, the narrator gets prescriptions from local doctors for C. During this time, the narrator's friend, Jane, gets involved with a man who smokes tea instead of doing junk. His new age philosophy contrasts with the narrator. The narrator leaves Jane in Mexico with this man. He finds out later that she is dead.

Chapter 3 Analysis

Lee goes into greater details about the drug culture and describes the various networks. This continues what he began in the first chapter, when he drew distinctions between the drug subculture and the "normal" world. Here he has the opportunity to show that he knows the steps and stages of the drug underworld. He revels in this specialized knowledge. At the same time, he undercuts this sense of a drug community by providing examples of how drug addicts injure themselves and others because of their habits. The Rube is one of many people in the novel who is killed in cold blood for the convenience of it. Similarly, Jane's addictions and experimentations also get her killed. The narrator is able to sum up all of the lives of his friends and companions from a removed space, implying that he has no strong feelings for any of them.



Chapter 4

Chapter 4 Summary

The narrator contacts Dr. Benway to begin a new project called Islam Incorporated. Benway explains his famous project in Annexia, where he encourages a police state in which arbitrary punishments are given for everyday offenses instead of using physical torture. This place quickly reduces the town to a mass of scared citizens. The narrator visits Benway in Freeland, where Benway runs a pseudo - psychiatric hospital. Benway explains how his career led from being a regular surgeon to an abortionist to his current role studying psychiatric disorders.

He explains his mind control and manipulation treatments. After Benway agrees to work with the narrator for Islam Incorporated, the hospital goes out of control, when the computer system breaks down and releases all the patients. The narrator describes the chaos of Freeland as addicts raid drugstores and people with various diseases infect or injure those around them.

Chapter 4 Analysis

The examples of Annexia and Freeland show Burroughs' preoccupation with mind control. Unlike the drug subculture, the more systematic approaches to controlling human populations like Annexia and Freeland are shown as very negative and frightening things. Dr. Benway, in particular, is a very interesting character. On the one hand, he is recognized and supported by the mainstream, because he is a doctor and runs fancy hospitals. On the other, he and his colleagues have dangerous drug habits themselves and are unconcerned with the condition of their patients' lives. Instead, doctors like Dr. Benway and many of the other psychiatrists mentioned in the novel act as though they are above the law with the freedom to manipulate and destroy individual human lives in the interests of science.

Chapter 5

Chapter 5 Summary

Joselito is a young Mexican peasant who is diagnosed with tuberculosis by a German doctor. Carl and the doctor discuss the options of treating Joselito either by chemicals or sending him to a sanitarium. Carl helps Joselito get a place in a nice sanitarium. Carl gets high and images from the sanitarium and the rest of his life mix together in a general hallucination.

Chapter 5 Analysis

Joselito is one of many background characters who rely on medical professionals to make decisions about his life. The conversations between Carl and the doctor do not take Joselito into consideration at all, but instead are interested in what looks best for them. At the same time, these professionals are also drug addicts whose choices are influenced more by their hallucinations than anything else.

Chapter 6

Chapter 6 Summary

A Sailor and Fats Terminal meet to arrange the sale of a drug in tubes and eggs. Sailor goes outside and receives a secret tube from a passing messenger. The tube is hidden in a pen and releases a black mist that the Sailor inhales. At the Meet Cafy, two types of organisms meet and engage in drug deals. The Mugwumps have no liver and live off sweets. The Reptile feed off of the Mugwumps. Fats goes to a Reptile to buy the eggs that he has promised to sell to the Sailor.

Chapter 6 Analysis

The Mugwumps and the Reptiles present new and interesting images. Following the theme that drug addiction takes away an addict's humanity, the Mugwumps and Reptiles are described as inhuman creatures with strange bodies and behaviors. Each of these creatures represents something about the drug subculture and the ways in which the various groups interact with each other and use each other to fuel their own needs.



Chapter 7

Chapter 7 Summary

Willy the Agent is in a detoxification unit at Hassan's Hospital. He goes through the agony of withdrawal, including nightmares and convulsions. The hospital is full of patients seeking other cures and treatments. The narrator describes his various drug-induced visions. One is of a Guard who wears a suit made of human flesh. He watches schoolboys across the street and lusts after them.

In a dirty bathroom, Dr. Benway operates on a woman using bathroom cleaning tools. The narrator hears various pieces of music, including the Star Spangled Banner. The narrator records his drug intake in "Habit Notes." He describes the difficulty he has finding new sources for drugs and new veins to shoot them into. He claims that the President is also a junkie and that the narrator provides him with drugs under the cover of a homosexual affair.

Chapter 7 Analysis

Again the medical profession and the drug subculture mix together to show that there are very few differences between the two. Dr. Benway's operation in the bathroom shows his callous disregard for his patient as well as the problem that there is no medicine available for operations, because it is being taken by nurses to use for illegal purposes. At the same time, the narrator takes the idea one step further by including the Star Spangled Banner, representing the United States and its own contradictions and hypocrisy. The Star Spangled Banner is distorted and demeaned as a parallel to the ways in which the medical profession is distorted and demeaned by doctors such as Dr. Benway and his colleagues.



Chapter 8

Chapter 8 Summary

Lee and Miguel meet at 10 a.m. Miguel is not using, but Lee gets him hooked again. Lee is on a constant stream of heroin. He had gone through a series of moldy flesh and severe infections. Lee goes to visit a friend and fellow addict, NG Joe. Joe became an addict after an attack of Bang - utot, a sexually linked disorder in which death occurs during a nighttime erection. In order to avoid having erections, NG uses spinal injections of heroin to kill all of his sex drive. The narrator waits for the drugstore to open. He imagines a conversation between an Inspector and a Reporter who examine the Inspector's genitals for infections.

Chapter 8 Analysis

The fictitious disease of Bang - utot has very interesting connections between the drug culture and the social problems of acceptable sexuality. In this example, drugs are used to keep the user from being sexually active in any way because of a fear that the sexual urge itself is lethal. This makes an interesting commentary on the lengths that people in society will go to in order to avoid confronting their sexuality. The fear of this fictitious disease is combined with the real fear of sexually transmitted diseases. In this case, sexually transmitted diseases are monitored by government - style officials, presumably with the intention of identifying those who have transgressed against a social sexual norm.



Chapter 9

Chapter 9 Summary

A fancy bar hosts various characters engaging in both drug - related and homosexual activities. A Mugwump repeatedly sodomizes a young boy. The Mugwump snaps the boy's neck and continues sodomizing his dead body. In another room, two young boys play and fight, randomly sodomizing each other. Several men of different ethnic characters perform erotic actions on each other that result in both pleasure and pain. The room is full of people in the midst of various types and stages of intercourse. The narrator describes many of the different boys introduced, many with physical and psychiatric disabilities, that are used for sexual pleasure, often resulting in their deaths.

Chapter 9 Analysis

In this chapter, the sexual politics of the novel go wild. For the next several chapters, the prevailing plot elements drop out and are replaced by a catalog of homosexual acts. Many of these acts also have the element of pedophilia, including the rape of young boys of various ethnic groups. Here the ethnic character has some sort of sexual connotation, making the different boys seem like different flavors of candy to be exploited by those in control of the situation. In addition, many of the sexual acts performed here result in the deaths of the boys on the receiving end. In some cases sex continues after the boy being used has died. All of these elements combine to take the scene above and beyond the idea of a counter culture to contrast against normal society. In this scene, these types of sexuality are shown to be normal, accepted, and systematized by those in control.

Chapter 10

Chapter 10 Summary

On a university campus full of barnyard animals, a professor lectures a class of male students. The professor gives the students highlights from his own sexual adventures and encourages the students to express their own sexuality freely. The professor calls attention to the Rime of the Ancient Mariner. He makes negative comments about the main character of the poem before returning to his lecture on sex acts among primates. He expresses his wish to show his sexual needs in the same ways that baboons do. The class becomes pigs who drink at the trough of his wisdom.

Chapter 10 Analysis

The university lecture provides an almost allegorical image of how the socially accepted ideas of university students and professors can be twisted into the new "norm" that the narrator is pursuing. Here the students and staff openly discuss sexuality, including their own bodies and habits. Sexuality is the vehicle that the professor uses to discuss a canonical work like Rime of the Ancient Mariner. In this world, instead of praising the poem, the professor criticizes it. At the same time, however, the allegorical meaning resurges at the end of the chapter, when the students are shown to be pigs eating wisdom like it is slop. This provides the overall commentary being made in this chapter, which seeks to show how university culture, like all socially acceptable subcultures, is not what it is assumed to be.



Chapter 11

Chapter 11 Summary

A theater troupe performs sex acts under the guidance of the Great Slashtubitch. The first scene is of a young boy and girl. After taking off their clothes, the two go into the bathroom, where the girl washes his anus in order to lick it. She begins with the anus and moves on to the pelvis. She puts on a rubber penis, called Steely Dan III, to anally penetrate him. She explains the history of her various rubber penises, including Steely Dan I and Steely Dan II.

The scene shifts so that Mary, the girl, watches Mark penetrate Johnny. The two ride a vibrating chair until Mark and Mary put Johnny in a noose and snap his neck. Mary has sex with his dead body. Mary and Mark have sex until Mark hangs Mary in the noose. He has sex with her as she dies. The scene changes and Johnny sets Mary on fire with gasoline. The scene changes again. Johnny and Mary are in a hotel room where Johnny performs oral sex on Mary, involving rubbing various drugs on her genitals. The scene changes to a boy arrested by the sheriff, who asks the crowd to examine the boy's penis. The curtain falls for the last time. Mary and Johnny bow with nooses around their necks.

Chapter 11 Analysis

The sexual theater repeats many of the same images from Hassan's Rumpus Room. Here again, the focus is on anal penetration, strangulation, and death. The main difference here is the added element of a female character, Mary. Mary is both an observer and a participant, whereas the male characters are only participants. This adds an interesting insight into how the author places female sexuality within his overtly male homosexual thematic structure. This conclusion is furthered by the ending of the chapter, when it is made clear that everyone is performing a role that does not really reflect who they are.



Chapter 12

Chapter 12 Summary

Dr. Schafer brings in a live patient to show at a conference, referring to him as "The Complete All American Deanxietized Man." The patient deteriorates on stage. A Southern doctor wants to kill the black attendants. The scene changes to a courtroom where the doctors are accused of killing a patient who had turned himself into a large black centipede. The lawyer frightens the jury by describing Dr. Schafer as a man who practices forcible lobotomy or, as he calls it, brain rape. The patient is identified as Clarence Cowie.

Chapter 12 Analysis

Whereas Dr. Benway's medical experiments have been presented in terms of humor and farce, the psychiatric conference lends an air of disturbing reality to this fantasy situation. Unlike Dr. Benway, who acts alone and is personally a very sinister character, Dr. Schafer seems idealistic, as though he really believes in what he is doing and see a clear positive purpose for it all. Dr. Schafer seems genuinely disillusioned, when others question his research and his morals, whereas Dr. Benway seems sarcastic and above all criticism.

The chapter also continues what is a dominant pattern throughout the remainder of the novel. The courtroom scenes, in which characters are called on to face criminal prosecution for their actions adds a dramatic element to the very complicated plot devices. The courtroom scenes allow the reader to have a voice in the story as opposed to much of the book where the reader must sit passively through things that are clearly wrong. In the courtroom scenes, the reader's indignation is felt in the indignation of the prosecuting attorney. This use of the courtroom scene establishes an interesting perspective on justice, as the norms of the fantasy worlds collide with those of the "real" world of the reader.



Chapter 13

Chapter 13 Summary

In the city of Interzone, no one has any privacy and all the homes are connected and open to the public. All types of people live here together. The city experiences many natural and human disasters, including violence and disease. The market sells all types of drugs that appeal to all sorts of people. One such drug is yage. Many people who take yage experience a calm and peaceful state. The drug helps medicine men solve crimes and treat diseases.

One man describes sex outside of gravity where sperm floats freely. The scene changes to a courtroom where a jury is trying to determine the paternity of a no-gravity pregnancy. A man in the market argues against many religious figures, including Christ, Buddha, and Mohammed. He claims all miracles are possible with drugs. In a museum, Greek boys bring feces in bowls while boys of various ethnic groups have sex with each other. A.J. tells the story of a boy who literally cuts "a piece of ass" from a prostitute. A woman named Iris lives off of heroin and has needles sticking out of her body all the time.

Chapter 13 Analysis

The city of Interzone has all the characteristics of a normal city, but has more opportunities to indulge in drugs and sexual practices in a public way. The novel's overall concern for the privacy of citizens, both of their property and of their mental health, continues here in Interzone where everyone must conduct themselves in public and do not have the option of a private life.

The courtroom pattern is continued in this chapter as the plot breaks to determine the legal consequences of the hypothetical scenarios. Here the emphasis is on the prevailing social question of adapting to a new culture or new technology. While the example of no-gravity sex and its complications in paternity cases is absurd, the underlying message is one in which the current structures of society are incapable of dealing with the changing needs of modern society.



Chapter 14

Chapter 14 Summary

At a meeting of the Nationalist Party, the Party Leader and his Lieutenant discuss the Market. They talk about the sexual cycles that go in the market. They make many racist comments about nationalities, ethnic groups, and religions. A Salesman sells random useless kitchen equipment to an American housewife. Various members of the community have sex in unorthodox positions as they go about their daily lives. A story is told about a man who replaces real stones with fake ones until a coven of witches send him to jail.

Dr. Benway and Dr. Schafer discuss their work. Benway argues that nothing Schafer has done is wrong, though Schafer is doubtful. They talk about eliminating human body parts to make human bodies simpler. The Huntsmen get together for a breakfast meeting. On a radio show, Dr. Berger examines the mentally ill, including a guest he claims is a cured homosexual. The radio crew argue about how to improve the show. They argue that homosexuals are unhealthy and bad. The political bosses plan riots. The planned riots break out and destroy the peacefulness of the market.

Chapter 14 Analysis

The Interzone situation takes on allegorical qualities. The leaders of the political parties remain nameless, only defined by titles. This allows the commentary to be about the essential nature of politics rather than the disadvantages and advantages of various specific political systems. As the characters here are allegorical, they are able to sum up a variety of social problems very quickly. Here the many comments relating to racial and ethnic difference that that cropped up throughout the novel have a clear political aim. The party heads use their racist stereotypes to justify their manipulation of the masses in order to stay in power.

The party leaders are shown in relation to the medical establishment by including the conversations between Dr. Benway and Dr. Schafer. Both conversations involve the large scale manipulation of people, whether by force or by mental control. Just as the political bosses circumvent the political process by staging riots in order to get credit for putting them down, the doctors circumvent their code of medical ethics in discussing the ways that human beings could be destroyed and manipulated with the aim of achieving the greater good for the species.



Chapter 15

Chapter 15 Summary

A.J. is an agent, though no one knows who he works for. He covers his profession by posing as an international playboy. Many stories about A.J.'s exploits circulate, but usually with several competing versions. A.J. funds a schools for delinquent young boys and unveils a statue on campus of a pair of young boys about to sodomize each other. Salvador Hassan O'Leary runs a complicated drug empire. Clem and Jody are Russian agents who pretend to be American tourists.

There are several groups. The Liquefactionists and the Senders fight against each other. The Senders want to connect all people through a brain control operation. The Divisionists are in between the other two groups. They want to cut off parts of their bodies to grow new people, called Replicas. The Factualists oppose everyone and call everyone "The Human Virus."

Chapter 15 Analysis

Whereas the previous chapter explored politics in a very general and allegorical way, this chapter presents political factions in a more absurdist way, possibly to point out the absurdities in any hardline political thought. The groups described as Liquefactionists, Senders, Divisionists, and Factualists all represent absurd stances about the future of humanity and rely on absolute and total control in order to accomplish their aims. Essentially all the groups share the same ridiculous base and therefore all represent equal political agendas, none more absurd than the last. In this way, the commentary on government control and manipulation of citizens is carried that one step further to show that all such elaborate systems contain the same negative and destructive forces.

Chapter 16

Chapter 16 Summary

The Old Court House is so backlogged with cases that no one ever comes to court. It is located in Pigeon Hole, an isolated area. Lee is trying to have his case heard so he will not be evicted from the house he lives in. His reason is that he is infected with the plague and must be quarantined. The Inspectors analyze his papers and his body. He walks through the Old Court House looking at the ridiculous trials. Lee tries to get his case heard but cannot get the attention of the County Clerk, who is too busy telling racist jokes and describing how to kill black people.

Chapter 16 Analysis

This chapter uses two ridiculous situations to clash with each other. The first situation is that of the Courthouse in which no cases can be heard or won. This system shows the inability of social structures to accommodate the many and varied needs of modern society. Instead, the break down of the system keeps everyone from being able to do anything officially or publicly and everyone must work out a legal code for themselves.

The second situation, which is simply mirrored in the Courthouse situation, is the case that Lee seeks to bring before the court. His case is completely ridiculous and adds another layer of absurdity to the courthouse situation. His case reflects that the laws in place make no sense just as the attempts to enforce or manipulate such laws makes no sense. Overall, the absurdity of the chapter continues the pattern of exposing established social systems to be archaic and useless in actually assisting the needs of people.



Chapter 17

Chapter 17 Summary

Aracknid is the chauffeur of Andrew Keif. He is not homosexual and generally is a bad person. Keif is a novelist who lives in the red light district. In the Zone building, many international transactions usually involving sexual products take place. Leif and Marvie run the place. The Island is a British military base across from the Zone. Each year the Island reaffirms the wish for the military to stay. There is a formal government on the Island, mostly populated with baboons. No one wants to be elected President.

Chapter 17 Analysis

To add further absurdity to the novel's overall commentary on government is the presentation of the Island and its unique and ridiculous forms of government and ideas about democracy. Here again government has the effect of dehumanizing people to the point where animals are serving in elected office.



Chapter 18

Chapter 18 Summary

Carl Peterson is called for an appointment with Dr. Benway. Benway rambles on about the need to treat homosexuality like a disease. Carl explains that he is not homosexual. Benway refuses to tell him why he is there. Carl falls asleep during the explanation but wakes up to have his semen tested for homosexuality. When Carl leaves the office, he is accosted by a homosexual man who thinks he is homosexual, because he just came out of Benway's institute. Carl returns later for his test results. He is negative for homosexuality and asks to evaluate photographs of pinup girls. Some of the girls are really boys dressed to look like girls. Carl admits that he had some homosexual contact in the military. Carl wakes up and then the room disappears.

Chapter 18 Analysis

Carl Peterson's interview and subsequent treatment by Dr. Benway provide an interesting summary of the novel's look at the psychiatric profession as well as indicating the difficulty of dividing between reality and fantasy. Dr. Benway calls Carl in with no intention but manipulating him into becoming a homosexual in order to cure him of being a homosexual. Carl, as a typical person, tries to abide by the authorities despite the warning signs that he receives from Dr. Benway. This shows the predicament of the average system in the face of an overwhelming bureaucracy that is able to justify its own system only through its own logic.

At the same time, the reader is left to wonder what parts of Carl's experience were real and which ones were part of some elaborate hallucination. The hallucination scenario brings up yet more questions about what strange experiments Dr. Benway conducted, when Carl was not conscious. All of these layers contribute to the overall sense of confusion that pushes the novel forward to its conclusion.



Chapters 19, 20, 21 and 22

Chapters 19, 20, 21 and 22 Summary

A group of junkies get high and describe their feelings. The Sailor is recovering from using drugs and waits in line to get more. The man behind the counter describes the hallucinations of people have coke horrors. A boy at the counter asks Sailor for drugs but Sailor refuses to take money for them. It is implied that Sailor wants something other than drugs in exchange.

Sailor takes the boy to his apartment and lays out the drug paraphernalia. The Sailor asks for Time in exchange. The boy agrees to the deal. The Sailor reaches inside the boy and takes out a black egg. He gives the boy the drugs. The Exterminator is charged with finding the various agents and killing them. Fats Terminal is an ooze pouring through the City pressure tanks and filling the city. Two agents reveal themselves. The city is filled with various images of destruction and mayhem.

Chapters 19, 20, 21 and 22 Analysis

This series of chapters provides a catalog of events and impressions that are generally unrelated to each other. As the plot begins to come to an end, the elements that tie it together fall apart and reveal an overwhelming confusion. It is difficult for the reader to make sense of the information given, particularly in how any of it relates to the main plotline of the novel. Instead, these chapters contribute to the sense of confusion and reinforce it, giving the reader little opportunity to create concrete meaning.



Chapter 23

Chapter 23 Summary

Hauser and O'Brien work for the City Narcotic Squad. They are assigned to arrest William Lee in his hotel. They walk in on him as he is preparing to inject drugs. They allow him to inject the drugs before going downtown. As he is clearing a syringe of alcohol, he accidentally squirts one of the cops and Hauser shoots at him. Lee shoots at Hauser with O'Brien's gun. O'Brien tried to get his other gun but Lee shoots him too. Lee leaves the hotel. He goes to stock up on drugs so he can leave the city quickly. He goes to his friend, Nick, to get some drugs. Nick brings them and Lee pays. He hides out at homosexual bathhouses. He calls the police department and asks to speak with the cops he killed, but no one knows who he is talking about.

Chapter 23 Analysis

In this chapter, the events of the first chapter are explained, bringing the storyline full circle. Like the opening chapter, this chapter has one of the most clear plot structures, because it reflects the need to interact within the "real" world instead of having free reign in the fantasy world. The chapter closes with more confusion for the reader, who must now question whether the whole plot has actually occurred or if all of it is simply a long hallucination on the part of the narrator.



Chapters 24 and 25

Chapters 24 and 25 Summary

The author provides commentary on Lee's life. Lee and his friend Bill Gaines go to Panama and on through Central and South America. The American Embassy will not give any information about him other than the fact that he is dead and buried in the American Cemetery. The author explains his philosophy of sensual or "possession writing." The story becomes the author's adventures in Tangiers during which he met the characters described in the novel. He calls *Naked Lunch* a How To Manual of blue print to the experience of drug addiction. The author recounts various drug hallucinations and conversation.

This section is told in poetic terms and details thoughts about drug addiction, including the character of Lee and the City of Interzone.

Chapters 24 and 25 Analysis

This last section of the novel breaks away from the storylines and presents a clear message directly from the author to the reader. In this way, the author does away with the layers of narrative that he creates in order to cut to the heart of the matter. He gives a clear purpose to the novel itself, explaining many of the confusing elements in terms of the experience of the drug addict and the place of the drug addict in modern society. To add another narrative element to the novel, he closes with a poetic twist on his character that sums up the plot of the novel without reaching any definite conclusions.



Characters

William Lee

William Lee is the narrator of the story though his character drops out of much of the plot, particularly in the middle of the novel. Instead, Lee's direct experience acts as a defining structure that provides an introduction and conclusion to the events of the novel. Lee is a drug dealer and addict on the run after killing two police officers. He uses his various connections to make his way out of the United States and into Mexico. After that, the reader is left to judge if anything that happens is real or hallucinated.

Lee is clearly based on the author, himself, William S. Burroughs, who went on a similar trip around the world in order to avoid arrest in the United States. The characters described reflect the people that Burroughs met in the many exotic locations he visited during his trip. In addition, the experience of drug addiction and sexual experimentation reflect the author's own experience as well as his separation from mainstream American culture which takes on such a strong presence in the novel.

Dr. Benway

Dr. Benway represents the medical establishment, particularly that of psychiatry, that became prominent in the 1950s. The connections between psychiatry's legal drug abuse and the illegal drug abuse in the underground subculture are not clearly divided in the novel, therefore asking the question of why they are so divided in modern society. For the most part, Dr. Benway's research and interests are in controlling the masses through elaborate systems of manipulation, both chemical and social. His attitude toward humanity is generally very negative and clinical. He sees nothing wrong in manipulating and destroying people in order to advance his theories. Often his evidence is manipulated in order to allow him to continue with unethical experiments, particularly when it comes to homosexuality and his obsession with curing it.

Dr. Schafer

Dr. Schafer is an interesting counterpoint to Dr. Benway in that he has some ethical qualms about his work. Dr. Schafer represents the pure scientist who does not think of the consequences of his actions but instead follows his theories to their fullest potential without considering the human element of his research. His experiments end up destroying a person and turning him into a monster. The social outcry against his experiments leads him to question his own scientific research and personal ethics.



The Vigilante

The Vigilante is one of the many drug addicts whose experience is used as an example in the novel. The Vigilante uses his drug abuse to justify his crimes and therefore spends the rest of his life in a drug rehabilitation center where he never really loses his taste for drugs. His case shows how difficult it is to change from addiction and how the methods society has of curing drug addicts are inadequate, because they do not understand the underlying causes of drug addiction or the factors that continue it.

The Rube

The Rube's role in the novel is small but shows a lot about the realities of drug culture. The Rube's death by overdose in prison is not an accident. Instead it is a deliberate act by his own friends in order to save themselves from any more complications because of The Rube. This act continues one of the novel's overall themes about the dehumanizing nature of drug addiction and the ways that it changes an addict into something that is often unrecognizable as a person.

A.J.

A.J. is a high level drug dealer. Nothing is known about his sources or connection except that they are very high level. He covers his drug activities by acting as an international playboy, thereby keeping himself above the law. A.J. is one of many characters with a connection to Muslim or Arab ethnic groups. Though the reasons for this connection are not clearly explained, they are part of an ongoing commentary in the novel about the ways that ethnic groups interact with the drug and sexual experimentation going on.

The Sailor

The Sailor is a drug addict who exists on a special plane of living all his own. He is also described as inhuman or lacking in essential humanity. His interactions are not limited to drug abuse. Instead, his actions are metaphors to drug use and give him a strange spiritual or demonic quality. In exchange for drugs he is often interested in things other than money, particularly time and mortality.

Carl Peterson

Carl Peterson is an unsuspecting citizen who is called in for an interview with Dr. Benway. Dr. Benway's experiments involve curing homosexuality. Though Carl insists that he is not homosexual, Dr. Benway's experiments put him in situations where he is forced to admit homosexual acts and interact with other homosexuals. The reader is



unsure of the exact nature of the experiments of the treatments that Carl undergoes at the hand of Dr. Benway.

Hauser

Hauser is one of the police officers that works with the Narcotic Squad and is given the assignment to arrest Lee. Hauser and his partner O'Brien go to Lee's hotel to arrest him but allow him to have one last injection. This gives Lee the opportunity to kill the two police officers. Later, however, it is unclear if these two police officers actually exist or if they are part of Lee's hallucinations.

O'Brien

O'Brien is one of the police officers that works with the Narcotic Squad and is given the assignment to arrest Lee. O'Brien and his partner Hauser go to Lee's hotel to arrest him but allow him to have one last injection. This gives Lee the opportunity to kill the two police officers. Later, however, it is unclear if these two police officers actually exist or if they are part of Lee's hallucinations.

Nick

Nick is one of Lee's friends in the city. When Lee needs to flee the city quickly in order to avoid arrest, he goes to Nick to get a stock of drugs to last him on his journey. Nick agrees to meet him and supply him with drugs, allowing Lee to continue on his way.

The Professor

The Professor lectures his university students on a variety of subjects, including the Rime of the Ancient Mariner, his own sexual experiments, and primate anthropology. His students interact with him in discussing and displaying their own sexuality. At the end of the scene, however, the students are shown to be pigs eating slop instead of students absorbing wisdom.

Dr. Berger

Dr. Berger hosts a radio show on psychiatry. During his show he brings on guests that he claims are cured homosexuals. After the show is broadcast, the members of the production crew argue about how to improve the show and express their opinions that homosexuals, whether cured or not, are too unhealthy to have on a mainstream radio show. This attitude shows the conflict between the idea of psychiatry and the moral traditions of mainstream society.



Objects/Places

The Hospital

There are many hospitals throughout the novel. Most of them cater to a variety of ailments, with specific emphasis on drug abuse detoxification programs and on tuberculosis isolation. In each case, the system of treatment is shown to be arbitrary and without considering the needs of the patient.

Hassan's Rumpus Room

Hassan's Rumpus Room is a sexual free - for - all in which spectators watch young boys of various ethnic groups contorted and displayed in erotic performances. The spectators then interact with the young boys, performing all manner of homosexual acts before killing them.

Interzone

Interzone is a city that centers on a common market. The market sells all manner of drugs and sexual favors. The citizens of Interzone have no personal privacy and therefore all the sexual acts that would be private are forced to be public. Interzone is in the midst of intense political struggles to control the population, leading many factions to develop in the name of transforming the society.

Freeland

Freeland is a place where Dr. Benway creates an elaborate social system that he controls. He runs a psychiatric hospital where he experiments on the citizens of Freeland and manipulates them in inhuman ways to promote his research.

Annexia

Annexia is one of the town that uses Dr. Benway to control its population. Instead of physical torture, he institutes a system of arbitrary bureaucracy that punished the citizens for random offenses and creates an environment of fear and anxiety.

The Market

The Market of Interzone is a place of great commercial exchange, often of drugs and sexual favors. The Market is one of the key targets by the political bosses of Interzone, who want to destroy the peaceful commerce in order to control the town.



Technological Psychiatry

The conference of Technological Psychiatry allows Dr. Schafer to present his experiment. His patient deteriorates into a large centipede. The members of the conference are taken to court on charges of killing the patient and having reckless regard for human life.

Mugwumps

Mugwumps are a class of drug addicts that are described as non human creatures. These creatures have no liver and only eat sweets.

Reptiles

The Reptiles are another class of drug addicts that are described as non human creatures. They eat the Mugwumps and sell eggs that, possibly, represent the mortality of other drug addicts.

Liquefactionists

The Liquefactionists are one of many absurd groups that exist in Interzone. Their plans to change society include the idea that all people have a protoplasmic core to which messages can be sent for mind control purposes. For this purpose they have a special group of people called Senders, who send the messages out to everyone else.

Factualists

The Factualists deny everything that is not strictly factual. They reject all the ideas of the other groups.

Divisionists

The Divisionists want to cut off piece of their bodies and regrow new versions of themselves which they call replicas. They create an elaborate set of rules about replica - original interaction.

The Old Court House

The Old Court House is no longer useful as a courthouse, because it has such a long list of cases that no one lives long enough to have their case heard. Lee goes to the Old Court House to present a care for quarantine, because he claims to have the plague.

Lee's Hotel

Lee is sitting in his hotel, about to inject drugs, when the police come in. They want to take him downtown to be arrested but make the mistake of letting him finish injecting. He squirts one police officer in the eye with his syringe and manages to steal his gun and kill both police officers.

Social Sensitivity

Considering the howls of outrage from many quarters that greeted the publication of *Naked Lunch*, and the demands that the book (and the author) be suppressed, it might seem bizarre to describe its author as a man who regards his ideas about the failure of contemporary social systems to be the crux of his entire oeuvre, but William S. Burroughs was accurately described by Mary McCarthy as a "Soured Utopian," and in spite of his own condemnatory comments on many aspects of society, he has stated unequivocally that "My purpose in writing has always been to express human potentials and purposes relevant to the Space Age." The exploration of various forms of addiction in *Naked Lunch* have more to do "with addiction itself," as Burroughs has observed, than the often sensationalistic detail of an obsession with drugs, sex, money, or power, and Burroughs sees these forms of psychological and physical dependency as elements of a system designed to control human beings so that their biological and aesthetic potential is "perverted by stupidity and inhuman malice." Burroughs sees all of his work as a kind of attack on the various forces which he feels are rendering the planet uninhabitable, and this has led to the depiction in *Naked Lunch* of people exhibiting the worst manifestations of human behavior that he can imagine to show just how effective these forces have been. The striking, even shocking images of people in *Naked Lunch* is part of Burroughs's plan to write in an inventive fashion designed to "create an alteration in the reader's consciousness," which accounts for the extremities of the actions he depicts — not to exploit the sensationalistic nature of the physical activities he describes, but to jar the reader out of customary patterns of responding to characterization and conventional narrative structure.



Techniques/Literary Precedents

To fully understand the uniqueness of Burroughs's technical elements in *Naked Lunch*, it is necessary to consider one of the problems he faced during its period of composition, organization, and revision — although even those elements do not sufficiently describe the manner in which the book was assembled. In a letter to Allen Ginsberg in the early 1950s, Burroughs wrote that he had "hopes of getting what he really means down on paper" but that he "despair[ed] of ever doing so." To Jack Kerouac, he worried about the limits of the genre itself, "I tell you the novel is completely inadequate to express what I have to say. I don't know if I can find a form." The manuscript originally consisted of notes Burroughs had been making for years, plus letters he had written (*The Yage Letters*, 1963) to Allen Ginsberg, and while he struggled with the shape of his work, he wrote in a frenzy of energy, telling Ginsberg that the force of inspiration "shakes me like a great black wind through the bones." He thought that the chapters might function as a mosaic, with the often sharp transitions creating "the dream impact of juxtaposition," but in a mood of discouragement, he told Ginsberg to "read it in any order. It makes no difference."

Ginsberg and other friends who assisted Burroughs all offered suggestions about how to organize the material that Burroughs originally called "Word Hoard" and which Ginsberg described as consisting of "personal letter matter . . . imaginative improvisation and fantasy and routine matter."

The "routine matter" actually constitutes the core of *Naked Lunch*. Burroughs thought of the passages of "routine matter" as "skits" or "routines" and his longtime friend, collaborator, and orchestrator of public performances for more than two decades, James Grauerholz, calls them "an absurdist form of soliloquy." Burroughs used them originally as a way to overcome a kind of natural reticence, since the man performing these routines was, in a sense, another self operating in a theatrical realm which made unabashed displays of zaniness possible.

Burroughs was exhilarated by the creation of these routines, explaining to Ginsberg how they were "uncontrollable, unpredictable, charged with potential danger for Lee [that is, the William Lee character which is one of his fictive auto-equivalents]," and they offered him access to the turbulent regions of his subconscious mind, the ultimate subject of the book. As Skerl has commented, though, "in a narrative form, he needs characters, action, and setting to convey his ideas," and consequently, Burroughs located the novel in several sections of the United States (New York City, a hideous heartland main street) and in what vaguely corresponds to a tropical country (Mexico conflated with South America), a place called Freeland (which Burroughs said is modelled on Scandinavia but which seems like the United States with a socialist government), and the Interzone. He had originally thought of *Naked Lunch* as a novel of the Interzone, which he based on Tangier, a place in the 1950s where drug use, casual sex, free-wheeling bohemianism, superstition, and misogyny combined to produce a setting where all kinds of wandering, rootless hustlers and hipsters commingled. Further, he fashioned a political system of four parties (Liquefactionists, Conferents/Senders, Divisionists, and



Factualists) competing, but as he admitted, this was artificial and did not work very well, which is why it is not crucial to the organization of the novel.

Within this loose but workable arrangement, Burroughs had to devise a voice which would convey his singular style of expression. Grauerholz calls the creation of this voice "a man breaking through into unexplored literary territory," and it includes such diverse elements as the Victorian model of the unflappable, self-effacing English explorer in colonial realms; the inner-city addict hip to the drug scene; the academic capable of quasi-scientific jargon which explains everything in terms of theories based on dubious experiments; and the manic prankster high on language itself who can pull all these strains into an unfolding collage of speech and rhythms orchestrated like a jazz improvisation, what Ginsberg called the "Grand style" of *Naked Lunch*. In addition, the hard, flinty mood of the introduction and the somewhat more reflective musing of the "Atrophied Preface," which makes up the last chapter, function as frames, allowing Burroughs to set up and comment on the intervening material. As Skerl asserts, the action of *Naked Lunch* "is the flow of consciousness" and the voice of consciousness is a literary expression of the mind of the man who wrote the book. Burroughs knew the work of Samuel Beckett, who was pursuing some similar motifs, but aside from the precedent of James Joyce, there is little in the way of literary expression that anticipated what Burroughs was doing. *Naked Lunch* is more akin to the work of painters, jazz musicians, and poets like Ginsberg (or other Beats) who were pressing the boundaries of literary possibility. In a sense, Burroughs is the precedent — his innovations and inventions stand on the threshold which many others in the twentieth century have subsequently crossed.



Themes

Themes

One of the most unsettling and controversial aspects of *Naked Lunch* is Burroughs's insistence that the condition of existence he evokes is not just an easily dismissable, thoroughly exaggerated version of an uncommon life pattern exhibited by beatniks, drug fiends, and other counterculture freaks, but a continuous revelation of some fundamental facts of basic human psychology. The narrator, who disarmingly introduces himself in the introduction as "Old Uncle Bill Burroughs," is now fully recovered (he claims) from an addiction to heroin (among other things), and is prepared to offer the reader a sort of retrospective tour of an addict's life. While the invitation to explore territory normally forbidden to respectable citizens has some of the appeal of the trip through dangerous but exciting outlaw precincts, as Burroughs develops the situation, he gradually makes progressively clear that what he is actually offering is an excursion into a dark part of the human psyche that the reader ignores at his own peril. Beyond this, the territory he proposes to investigate is his own subconscious mind — the place where the extraordinary images and language displays of his writing have their origins.

The interlinkage of Burroughs's mental cosmos and the world in which tyrannical forces of control exercise power for purely destructive purposes is a part of the postmodern thrust of his work, offering an intriguing vision of the process of shaping the material from which narrative forms while the narration is unfolding. Since the author is so closely intertwined with the text, his ex-addict's preoccupation with his own physical responses is a paramount feature of the narrative flow, and Burroughs draws on it heavily as an important subsidiary theme — the refusal to recognize the body and its demands as crucial to all human activity is an important element in the matrix of denial and suppression that is part of the larger picture of distortion Burroughs presents in *Naked Lunch*. The wild, surreal, absurdist realm of the novel is built on a hyperbolic presentation of various, often very coarsely described, scenes of physical extravagance and over indulgence in accordance with the principle — as Jennie Skerl, one of Burroughs's most illuminating critics has observed — that addiction is an operative metaphor for the human condition. Thus, the manner in which the "characters" in the novel are compelled to satisfy their addictive cravings functions as a demonstration of how people are manipulated or controlled by outside forces that can produce manifestations of revolting, disgusting, and perhaps perversely fascinating behavior. In another, more subtle expression of this theme, the curiosity about this kind of behavior that the narrative touches on is an example of how language itself becomes an addictive agent, since the same attraction/repulsion principle may apply to descriptions of actions that a reader might prefer not to see but which carry a powerful temptation to continue reading. The eminent critic George Steiner complained about Burroughs's explicit writing, "In the name of privacy, enough!" but Burroughs rejoined "In whose name . . .?" implying that secrecy is fundamental to the powers of control, and that to examine what has been decreed taboo is essential to preserving freedom.



Although Burroughs does not endorse, nor necessarily condemn the outrageous behavior he is documenting, the world of the underground drop-out or rebel is set against his often lacerating depictions of conventional society as an alternative derived from what Burroughs calls "The Algebra of Need." This phrase refers to the failure of contemporary social systems to satisfy basic human requirements, but is also a play on the root of the Arabic Al Jebr, which refers to a reunion, or re-integration of broken parts — that is, the fragments of the human psyche. The phrase "Wouldn't You" which occurs both at the beginning and in the "Atrophied Preface" which forms the conclusion of the novel is a refrain of collusion, undercutting the pious protestations (like Steiner's) that the subjects Burroughs approaches are not significant or universal. The instinctive search for a mind-transporting substance, while acknowledged as dangerous, is offered as definitively human to some degree, while the characters that populate the "carny world" of many of the episodes in *Naked Lunch* are expressions of tendencies in American social and cultural life that are more realistic than the sanitized figures of many so-called mainstream novels of the time.

Drugs and Homosexual Subcultures

The novel presents two key subcultures. One of these is the drug subculture and the other is the homosexual subculture. The two are united early in the novel by the narrator's assumption that he would be punished more harshly for engaging in homosexual activities than he would for selling illegal drugs. Both subcultures are presented, often side by side, as the defining characteristics of a fantasy society in which both acts would be considered commonplace and normal.

The drug culture is present throughout the first sections of the novel as the narrator describes the members of the inner circle of drug dealers and the techniques they use to keep themselves supplied with drugs at all times. The descriptions of procuring and injecting drugs show the reader the details of the social mechanisms that allow the drug culture to exist, such as using the local doctors in Mexico to get large prescriptions for things they could not get in the United States.

The homosexual culture is also presented as an inner circle who have access to anything that they wish. This often includes sodomizing young boys, often in a manner that implies sport or hobby rather than focused sexual experimentation. Homosexual subculture is often associated with intense pain and disregard for human suffering. The young boys who are used and abused in the private sex clubs are often killed during or after completing their sex acts.

Psychiatric Mind Control

Another large focus of the novel is the ways in which psychiatry combines with political forces to institute mind control over a population. The examples of Annexia, Freeland, and Interzone all include situations in which the medical establishment in the form of Dr. Benway are used to provide solutions to political mind control.



Dr. Benway's experiments focus on ways of manipulating the minds of his patients to further his own research. One of his main interests is human sexuality, and he often toys with the sexuality of his patients, creating new sexual identities for them in the interests of curing them of the conditions he, himself, gave them. Dr. Benway's attitude is that his work is above the law, and he has no ethical considerations about his experiments or the considerations of his patients.

In the same vein, Dr. Benway is involved in creating mental control devices for towns. In Annexia, he creates a system of arbitrary bureaucracy to break the will of the citizens and keep them in constant fear. In Freeland, he uses the population for his sadistic experiments and puts his patients through all manner of psychological torture. In Interzone, the citizens live without personal privacy, mirroring Annexia in the way that people could not have private lives and are forced to live publicly in all ways.

Utopia

Many of the experimental towns are based on ideas of Utopia, or creating a perfect world. This idea runs through many of the plot devices of the novel, providing many examples of how such absolute ideas bring destruction and must be based on removing the personal freedoms of the citizens. The towns of Interzone, Freeland, and Annexia are all based on this model, as are the political factions of the Liquefactionists, the Factualists, and the Divisionists.

The towns all involve an overarching political structure that is concerned with controlling the population. In order to do this, they institute widespread mental manipulation of the people. In Interzone, the political bosses stage riots in order to scare the citizens and gain support for stopping riots that they, themselves, instigated. In Freeland, the town allows Dr. Benway to experiment on citizens in order to keep the population under control. In Annexia, the town leaders go to the furthest lengths to control their population and institute a long term program of mental manipulation to create fear in the citizen in order to control them in all aspects of their lives.

Style

Points of View

The story is told in both first and third person. The opening chapters are told in the first person and the narrator is not named. This allows the reader to enter the story without really knowing who or what is going on. The first person is also used at the end of the story, when the author addresses the reader directly. In this case, however, the pronoun I is used to indicate the author, not the narrator.

The majority of the novel is told in the third person. Some of this is told omnisciently, especially in the case of the many hallucinations and commentaries on drugs and sexuality. On the other hand, many sections are starkly lacking in the omniscient narrator and, instead, are told about people and events without any emotional or psychological commentary. This allows the reader to remain distant from many of the events that are of an especially disturbing nature.

Setting

The novel takes place in a variety of location. The most important location is not really a physical place, but the mind of the narrator. Since so much of the plot is confusing in terms of location and action, it is very likely that much of it is actually a hallucination inside the mind of the narrator, who is a drug addict. This contributes to the sense of ambiguity throughout the novel in which the reader is unsure if events are really happening or not.

The physical places in the novel center mostly on three fictional towns. These are Interzone, Freeland, and Annexia. These towns all follow elaborate social codes that restrict the freedom of their citizens. These settings are often allegorical and archetypal in that they are not meant to be real places but to represent a broad cross section of social thought and the ways that ideas are carried out in society.

Language and Meaning

The novel described drug culture of the 1950s in great detail. Many of the terms are so specialized to that time period that modern readers are often confused. Many of the terms for specific drugs refer to nicknames or medical names for drugs that the modern reader might not recognize. None of this hinders the understanding of the plot. Some knowledge of modern drug culture might be helpful in order to understand what is going on in the novel and many of the situations are relevant to modern drug culture.

The novel is very direct and descriptive in its understanding of certain practices in drug and homosexual subcultures, as well as in its use of racial, ethnic, and religious groups. Much of the language is highly informal, meaning that it might be offensive to many



groups of readers. In addition, the subject matter described, particularly in relation to sodomy, is very graphic and likely offend or cause concern with many readers.

Structure

The novel has no defined structure. It is broken into twenty-five sections that are indicated by a break in text and a short title. Some of the sections are very long while others are only a page or two in length. Many of the sections have no plot action at all and simply catalog the thoughts and hallucinations of the narrator and other characters. The major break in the novel comes at the end, when the story concludes and the author directly addresses the reader. This section is set apart from the other parts of the book and discusses the novel, itself, as well as providing some commentary on the narrator of the novel, Lee, and his connections to the author's real experience.



Quotes

"You know how old people lose all shame about eating, and it makes you puke to watch them? Old junkies are the same about junk. They gibber and squeal at the sight of it. The spit hangs off their chin, and their stomach rumbles and all their guts grind in peristalsis while they cook up, dissolving the body's decent skin, you expect any moment a great blob of protoplasm will flop right out and surround the junk. Really disgust you to see it." (Chapter 1)

"I saw it happen. Ten pounds lost in ten minutes standing with the syringe in one hand holding his pants up with the other, his abdicated flesh burning in a cold yellow halo, there in the New York hotel room...night table litter of candy boxes, cigarette butts cascading out of three ashtrays, mosaic of sleepless nights and sudden food needs of the kicking addict nursing his baby flesh..." (Chapter 2)

"The Rube's attacks become an habitual condition. Cops, doormen, dogs, secretaries snarl at his approach. The blond God has fallen to untouchable vileness. Con men don't change, they break, shatter - explosions of matter in cold interstellar space, drift away in cosmic dust, leave the empty body behind. Hustlers of the world, there is one Mark you cannot beat: The Mark Inside..." (Chapter 3)

" 'I deplore brutality,' he said. 'It's not efficient. On the other hand, prolonged mistreatment, short of physical violence, gives rise, when skillfully applied, to anxiety and a feeling of special guilt. A few rules or rather guiding principles are to be borne in mind. The subject must not realize that the mistreatment is a deliberate attack of an anti-human enemy on his personal identity. He must be made to feel that he deserves *any* treatment he receives, because there is something (never specified) horribly wrong with him. The naked need of the control addicts must be decently covered by an arbitrary and intricate bureaucracy so that the subject cannot contact his enemy direct.'" (Chapter 4)

"The scream shot out of his flesh through empty locker rooms and barracks, must resort hotels, and spectral, coughing corridors of T.B. sanatoriums, the muttering, hawking, grey dishwater smell of flophouses and Old Men's Homes, great, dusty customs sheds and warehouses, through broken porticoes and smeared arabesques, iron urinals worn paper thin by the urine of a million fairies, deserted weed - grown privies with a musty smell of shit turning back to the soil, erect wooden phallus on the grave of dying people plaintive as leaves in the wind, across the great brown river where whole trees float with green snakes in the branches and sad - eyes lemurs watch the shore out over a vast plain (vulture wings husk in the dry air)." (Chapter 5)

"The shoe shine boy put on his hustling smile and looked up into the Sailor's dead, cold, undersea eyes, eyes without a trace of warmth or lust or hate or any feeling the boy had ever experienced in himself or seen in another, at once cold and intense, impersonal and predatory." (Chapter 6)



"The French school is opposite my window and I dig the bots with my eight - power field glasses...so close I could reach out and touch them...They wear shorts...I can see the goose pimples on their legs in the cold spring morning...I project myself out through the glasses and across the street, a ghost in the morning sunlight, torn with disembodied lust." (Chapter 7)

"Lee lived in a permanent third - day kick, with, of course, certain uh essential intermissions to refuel the fires that burned through his yellow-pink-brown gelatinous substance and kept off the hovering flesh. In the beginning his flesh was simply soft, so soft that he was cut to the bone by dust particles, air currents and brushing overcoats while direct contact with doors and chairs seemed to occasion no discomfort. Now wound healed in his soft, tentative flesh...Long white tendrils of fungus curled round the naked bones. Mold odors of atrophied testicles quilted his body in a fuzzy grey fog..." (Chapter 8)

"Boys by the hundred plummet through the roof, quivering and kicking at the end of ropes. The boys hang at different levels, some near the ceiling and others a few inches off the floor. Exquisite Balinese and Malays, Mexicans Indians with fierce innocent faces and bright red gums. Negroes (teeth, fingers, toe nails and pubic hair gilded), Japanese boys smooth and white as china, Titian - haired Venetian lads, Americans with blond or black curls falling across the forehead (the guests tenderly shove it back), sulky blond Polacks with animal brown eyes, Arab and Spanish street boys, Austrian boys pink and delicate with a faint shadow of blond public hair, sneering German youths with bright blue eyes scream "Heil Hitler!" as the trap falls under them." (Chapter 9)

"He is illustrating at some length that nothing can ever be accomplished on the verbal level...He arrived at this method through observing that The Listener - The Analyst - was not reading the mind of the patient...The patient - The Talker - was reading *his* mind...That is, the patient has ESP awareness of the analyst's dreams and schemes whereas the analyst contacts the patient strictly from front brain...Many agents use this approach - they are notoriously long - winded bores and bad listeners..." (Chapter 10)

"Fade Out. (Mary, Johnny, and Mark take a bow with the ropes around their necks. They are not as young as they appear in the Blue Movies...They look tired and petulant.)" (Chapter 11)

"Blast of trumpets: The Man is carried in naked by two Negro Bearers who drop him on the platform with bestial, sneering brutality...The Man wriggles...His flesh turns to viscid, transparent jelly that that drifts away in green mist, unveiling a monster black centipede. Waves of unknown stench fill the room, searing the lungs, grabbing the stomach." (Chapter 12)

"First, every Fact is incarcerated along with the male hustlers and those who desecrate the gods of commerce by playing ball in the streets, and some old white - haired fuck staggers out to give us the benefits of his ripe idiocy. Are we never to be free of this grey - beard loon lurking on every mountain top in Tibet, subject to drag himself out of a hut in the Amazon, waylay one in the Bowery? "I've been expecting you, my son," and he



make with a silo full of corn. "Life is a school where every pupil must learn a lesson. And now I will unlock my Word Hoard..." (Chapter 13)

"Squads of police with thin lips, big noses and cold grey eyes move into the Market from every entrance street. They club and kick the rioters with cold, mechanical brutality. The rioters have been carted away in trucks. They shutters go up and the citizens of Interzone step out into the square littered with teeth and sandals and slippery with blood." (Chapter 14)

"Liquefactionists in general know what the score is. The Senders, on the other hand, are notorious for their ignorance of the nature and terminal state of sending, for barbarous and self - righteous manners, and for rabid fear of any *fact*. It is only the intervention of the Factualists that prevented the Senders from putting Einstein in an institution and destroying his theory. It may be said that only a very few Senders know what they are doing and these top Senders are the most dangerous and evil men in the world..." (Chapter 15)

"When suit is brought against anyone in the Zone, his lawyers connive to have the case transferred to the Old Court House. Once this is done, the plaintiff has lost the cast, so the only cases that actually go to trial in the Old Court House are those instigated by eccentrics and paranoids who want 'a public hearing,' which they rarely get since only the most desperate famine of news will bring a reporter to the Old Court House." (Chapter 16)

"They plunge into the deal. They perform unmentionable services for a spastic Greek shipping agent, and one entire shift of Customs inspectors. The two partners fall out and finally denounce each other in the Embassy, where they are referred to the We Don't Want To Hear About It Department and eased out a back door into a shit - strewn vacant lot, where vultures fight over fish heads. They flail at each other hysterically." (Chapter 17)

"For the first time the doctor's eyes flickered across Carl's face. Eyes without a trace of warmth or hate or any emotion that Carl had ever experienced himself or seen in another, at once cold and intense, predatory and impersonal. Carl suddenly felt trapped in this silent underwater cave of a room, cut off from all sources of warmth and certainty. His picture of himself sitting there - calm, alert with a trace of well - mannered contempt - went dim, as if vitality were draining out of him to mix with the milky grey medium of the room." (Chapter 18)

"The centipede nuzzles the iron door rusted to thin black paper by the urine of a million fairies...This is no rich mother load, but vitiate dust, second run cottons trace the bones of a fix..." (Chapter 19)

"A boy came in and sat at the counter in broken lines of long, sick junk - wait. The Sailor shivered. His face fuzzed out of focus in a shuddering brown mist. His hands moved on the table, reading the boy's Braille. His eyes traced little dips and circles, following whorls of brown hair on the boy's neck in a slow, searching movement." (Chapter 20)



"My present assignment: Find the live one and *exterminate*. Not the bodies but the "molds," you understand - but I forget that you cannot understand. We have all but a very few. But even one could upset our food tray. The danger, as always, comes from defecting agents: A.J., the Vigilante, the Black Armadillo (carrier of Chagas vectors, hasn't taken a bath since the Argentine epidemic of '35, remember?), and Lee and the Sailor and Benway. And I know some agent is out there in the darkness looking for me. Because all Agents defect and all Resisters sell out..." (Chapter 21)

"The vibrating soundless hum of deep forest and forgone accumulators, the sudden silence of cities when the junky cops and even the Commuter buzzes clogged lines of cholesterol for contact. Signal flares of orgasm burst over the world. A tea head leaps up screaming 'I got the fear!' and runs into Mexican night bringing down back brains of the world. The Executioner shits in terror at the sight of the condemned man. The Torturer screams in the ear of his implacable victim. Knife fighters embrace in adrenaline. Cancer is at the door with a Singing Telegram." (Chapter 22)

"Hauser and O'Brien. They had been on the City Narcotic Squad for 20 years. Old - timers like me. I been on the junk for 16 years. They weren't bad as laws go. At least O'Brien wasn't. O'Brien was the con man, and Hauser was the tough guy. A vaudeville team. Hauser had a way of hitting you before he said anything, just to break the ice. Then O'Brien gives you an Old Gold - just like a cop to smoke Old Golds somehow - and starts putting down a cop con that was really bottled in bond. Not a bad guy, and I didn't want to do it. But it was my only chance." (Chapter 23)

"Why all this waste paper getting The People from one place to another? Perhaps to spare The Reader stress of sudden space shifts and keep him Gentle? As so a ticket is bought, a taxi called, a plane boarded. We are allowed a glimpse into the warm peach - lines cave as She (the airline hostess, of course) leans over us to murmur of chewing gum, Dramamine, even Nembutal." (Chapter 24)

"A heaving sea of air hammers in the purple brown dusk tainted with rotten metal smell of sewer gas...young worker faces vibrating out of focus in yellow halos of carbide lanterns...broken pipes exposed..." (Chapter 25)



Adaptations

Since Burroughs himself has used the techniques of film in some of his books, notably *The Wild Boys* (1971), which is structured in accordance with montage editing theory, and *The Last Lords of Dutch Schulz* (1970), which is subtitled *A Fiction in the Form of a Film Script*, it was inevitable that an imaginative filmmaker would eventually attempt to make a film version of one of his books. As far back as the 1970s, one of his artistic collaborators Tony Balch spoke of a project to film *Naked Lunch*, but all of the problems involved in putting even a relatively straightforward film together prevented any progress until 1990. Then, David Cronenberg, the director of *The Fly* (1987), *Videodrome* (1983), and *The Brood* (1979), which dealt with the consequences of biological mutation, wrote a screenplay which was produced by TwentiethCentury Fox studios with an adequate production budget. The studio undoubtedly wanted to capitalize on Burroughs's growing popularity among a young segment of the population, but was still taking something of a risk.

Although it was not conspicuously successful on its original release, the film has — like much of Burroughs's work — become a kind of cult item and continues to reach a widening audience in videotape form.

Cronenberg decided to base the film on the book to some extent and to include incidents from Burroughs's life and legend as well. The main character, William Lee (one of Burroughs's recurring names for a protagonist sharing some of his traits), is shown in the depths of addiction, living in the nightmare world of the Interzone. Cronenberg wanted to actually film in Tangier but the Gulf War made this impossible and he ended up working on a huge set in a warehouse in Toronto. This allowed him to create a hallucinatory vision of Tangier much closer to the surrealistic setting of the novel. The film begins in New York City, however, where Burroughs/Lee is working as an exterminator. In the opening scenes, two friends (based on Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac, to some degree) discuss writing with him in a saloon. When he returns home, his wife (played brilliantly by Judy Davis) is shooting up bug powder, "A very literary high. A Kafka high. It makes you feel like a bug," she tells him. When Lee is taken into custody by narcotics officers, he is interrogated by a huge, roachlike insect who tells him his wife is an agent of the Interzone Corp. and may not even be human. He goes to a Dr. Benway (another of his auto-equivalents) to cure his addictions and when he returns home, tells his wife to prepare for a William Tell routine. Corresponding to the tragic event in 1951 when Joan Vollmer was shot, he misfires and after her death flees to Interzone.

There, he begins to write about her death — as he did indirectly in *Queer* which was not published until 1985 — but finds the typewriter transformed into a half machine/half bug which begins to dictate back to him. When not at work, he wanders through the bars and dives of the city, meeting other writers (based on Paul and Jane Bowles), interacting with the homosexual subculture and experiencing various hallucinations brought on by ingesting all sorts of substances. The manuscript of *Naked Lunch* is accumulating on the floor of his room, flung from the typewriter in a frenzy of creative



energy, but Lee is depressed since publication seems unlikely, even after Hank and Martin (Ginsberg and Kerouac) arrive and help him to find some order for his work.

Scenes based on some of the most outrageous descriptions of para-human sexual activity alternate with Lee's apparently extemporaneous monologues, which are actually wellwrought versions of some of the wittiest passages in *Naked Lunch*. The course of the film is inevitably episodic, although less so than the book since Lee's character provides a central focus. Lee seems to be on the verge of leaving Interzone at the conclusion, but customs guards at the border of neighboring Annexia demand a demonstration of his writing skills. Paralleling Burroughs's own admission that "I would never have become a writer but for Joan's death," Lee shoots the latest incarnation of Joan (again played by Judy Davis) and enters Annexia. As Francis Poole observes in an astute review, Cronenberg is "adept at creating a universe in which the unimaginable coexists with the mundane. All the creatures of *Naked Lunch* are the kinds of creepy-crawly things that might be conjured up by the imagination of an addict . . . By focusing more on the writer as a lost soul submerged in the world of drugs and decadent sex, Cronenberg gives insight into not only the destructiveness of addiction but the creative process as well." Films generally disappoint people who have previously enjoyed the book on which they were based, but given the situation, one might regard Cronenberg's effort as a complement to the book and a biocommentary on Burroughs's life.



Key Questions

Burroughs is such a controversial figure that discussions of his work, even among devotees, are likely to involve some serious contention, not to say outright anger. His extensive description of drug use, his avowed homosexuality, his singular use of language, his departures from traditional form and structure, his apparent uneasiness with women characters, his interesting life, his connections to the Beat scene, his laconic style of public performance, and his recent counterculture popularity make him one of the most interesting artists of the twentieth century. The interconnections between his life and his work make it almost a necessity to consult one of the accounts of his life (Morgan; Miles; Tytell; Charters) before considering his work. It would be best to approach him in a spirit of toleration, although agreement is not the point since one of his purposes in writing is to create perceptive awareness.

1. What does the title of *Naked Lunch* suggest? Should Burroughs have removed or changed any parts of the book? If so, which ones, and how would this affect the totality of the narrative?
2. Is Dr. Benway a positive or negative character? What are his most prominent traits? How does Burroughs expect the reader to respond to him?
3. What is the point of the introduction and the appendix in *Naked Lunch*?
4. Are there passages which might be called "spontaneous" or "disembodied" poetry (to use Kerouac's terms) in *Naked Lunch*?
5. How does Burroughs describe the underworld of addicts? Is the outlaw or criminal element glorified? And conversely, how does Burroughs present law enforcement officials?
6. What kind of comment on contemporary society is Burroughs making? What are the forces he wishes to condemn?
7. Does *Naked Lunch* provide material for an argument in favor of selective censorship? How should a person who feels reasonably open-minded but is disgusted by some of the graphic scenes in *Naked Lunch* respond to this question?
8. Burroughs's sense of humor may not be traditional or conventional, but it is an important facet of his work.

How does "comedy" function in *Naked Lunch*?

9. Burroughs's influence on popular culture — especially among young people — is well known. How many references (as in the grotesque passage containing the term "Steely Dan," which a rock-and-roll group took for its name) to familiar items can be drawn from *Naked Lunch*?

10. What did Mary McCarthy mean when she called Burroughs a "soured Utopian"?

Topics for Discussion

How do the drug and homosexual subcultures of the 1950s mix in the novel?

Consider the place of the medical establishment in the novel, particularly in the case of Dr. Benway and Dr. Schafer.

Compare and contrast the various Agents, including Lee and A.J.

How would you categorize the parts of the novel that describe the plot of "real" events versus the parts of the novel that might be visions or hallucinations?

What commentary is being made through the example of Freeland?

How does the book mirror William S. Burroughs' real life experiences, including running from the law, traveling to exotic locations, and becoming involved in underground drug and homosexual cultures?

What effect is given by the graphic descriptions of sex and violence? How would these factors contribute to the initial public reception of the book in the 1950s?

Related Titles

The material which was transformed into *Naked Lunch* from Burroughs's "Word Hoard," consisting of letters, journals, and other writings, contained sufficient additional matter to form the basis for the first trilogy, *The Soft Machine* (1961), *The Ticket That Exploded* (1962), and *Nova Express* (1964). For these books, however, Burroughs has further advanced the concept of a nontraditional narrative, incorporating the "cut-up" and "fold-in" methods which he devised with Brion Gysin. Since Burroughs is, in Grauerholz's words, "one of the great recyclers in literary history," it is not surprising to see the same sources revised and reorganized into many different "books." An examination of his *Collected Letters* (1993) and of Grauerholz's interesting compilation *Interzone* (1989) will also show some of the material included in *Naked Lunch* in earlier versions.

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