

The Neon Rain Study Guide

The Neon Rain by James Lee Burke

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Plot Summary

The Neon Rain is a Dave Robicheaux novel by James Lee Burke. In this novel, Dave finds a young girl's body while fishing in Cataouatche Parish. The investigation into this girl's death brings Dave to the attention of some very evil people, including members of the American government, who would rather kill Dave than allow him to stumble onto the real nature of their criminal endeavors. The Neon Rain is a dark and gritty detective novel that takes Dave to the edge of darkness where he nearly loses his soul, then brings him back again.

Dave visits Johnny Massina on death row the day he is scheduled to die. Johnny has asked for Dave, deciding to repay all his kindnesses in the past by telling him a rumor that has been floating around Angola. Johnny tells Dave that some very bad men want Dave dead. Dave tells his partner, Cletus Purcel, about Johnny's story. Cletus takes Dave to meet with Wesley Potts, supposedly the source of the information. Wesley tells Dave that Julio Segura, a Nicaraguan, wants Dave dead because he is investigating the death of a young girl found dead in Cataouatche Parish.

Dave found the dead girl while fishing and requested an autopsy be done after he noticed some irregularities about the girl's body. However, the local sheriff refused to request an autopsy, ruling the death an accidental drowning. Dave tries to persuade the sheriff to change his mind only to be harassed on the side of the road by two deputies. Dave gets the better of the deputies, ties them to their front bumper, and catches a ride back into the city with a young woman who happened to be passing by at the right moment. This girl, Annie Ballard, is kind and attractive, so Dave asks her out. Before going to her home that night, Dave makes a stop at the home of Julio Segura to ask him about the rumors Wesley has been spreading. Segura denies knowing who Dave is and has him and Cletus escorted off his property. That night, however, Dave is attacked when he arrives at Annie's house.

Three men led by a man named Murphy tie Annie up and force Dave's head into a bathtub when he refuses to tell them where a man named Fitzpatrick is. Dave has no idea who Fitzpatrick is. Annie manages to get her feet loose and makes enough noise to attract the neighbors. Murphy and his men leave. The following morning, Fitzpatrick shows up at Dave's houseboat. Fitzpatrick is a federal agent who has been investigating Segura's involvement in weapons trafficking to his home country of Nicaragua. Fitzpatrick makes a great show of expressing regret in involving Dave, but Dave knows that Fitzpatrick wants Dave's help.

Dave wants to find the three men who attacked him at Annie's, so he decides to arrest Segura in order to persuade him to answer a few questions. However, the bust goes badly and Dave ends up killing Segura. A short time later, Dave is kidnapped out of his houseboat. Murphy and his men force Dave to drink alcohol laced with drugs and then put him and Fitzpatrick, whom they have tortured, into Dave's car. The car is put into gear and allowed to fall three stories to the street below. Dave survives, but the car bursts into flames and Fitzpatrick is killed. Dave has a history of alcoholism, so the IAD



does not believe his story about his kidnapping. Instead, Dave is placed on suspension until the investigation is completed.

Dave begins drinking again. In his drunken haze, Dave calls the CIA and makes threats against Murphy, who he believes is a CIA agent. Dave later goes to the home of General Abshire, the man he overheard Murphy's men discussing as though he were their boss. Dave is arrested and charged with carrying a concealed weapon. The charge causes Dave to sober up. However, Dave is still determined to clear his name. Jimmy, Dave's brother, arranges for one of the men who kidnapped him to come to his house. Dave gets the man to confess to the kidnapping on tape, but the IAD detective Dave gives the tape to does not like Dave and does not believe the tape is reliable. Dave becomes enraged and punches the man.

Dave goes to Potts and learns where another of Murphy's men lives. However, when Dave arrives the man is already dead. A witness identifies Cletus as the man's killer. Dave sits on this information, unsure what to do about it. Later, a friend of Jimmy's tells Dave where he can find Murphy. Dave goes to Murphy's house and prepares to bring him back to New Orleans. Unfortunately, Murphy pulls a gun on Dave and Dave is forced to shoot him. When Dave goes to his boss to confess this death, however, the man's body has disappeared along with all evidence of the crime.

The federal investigators locate a warehouse filled with guns that Murphy and his friends planned to send to Nicaragua. Dave goes to General Abshire and tells him about this discovery and warns him that the police will come for him eventually. Abshire does not seem concerned, however. Dave learns a few days later that he has been cleared of all charges. However, Dave decides not to return to the New Orleans police department, but to go home to New Iberia with Annie instead.



Chapter 1

Chapter 1 Summary

Dave Robicheaux is a cop with the New Orleans police department. Dave is a recovering alcoholic who believes himself to be one of the last honest cops left on the job. Dave tries to live his life according to his morals but finds it more and more difficult with each passing day.

Dave is at Angola Penitentiary to visit Johnny Massina, a convicted murderer who is about to be put to death for throwing a young woman out the window of a hotel room. After talking a little about the past and telling a story about Dave's younger brother, Jimmy, Johnny tells Dave why he asked him to the prison. Johnny says that he has heard a rumor that some guys are looking to have Dave killed. Johnny does not know why but offers the name Wesley Potts as the source of the story. When Dave returns to New Orleans, he tells his partner this story. Cletus Purcel knows Wesley Potts and suggests that he and Dave go talk to him. Before they leave, Dave learns that an autopsy he was hoping to get the results for was never done. Dave found the body of a young girl while fishing in Cataouatche Parish a few days before and asked that an autopsy be performed. Unfortunately, the local sheriff did not see the evidence the same way Dave did and did not order the autopsy. Dave and Cletus, a budding alcoholic concerned with his own drinking problems, go to visit Wesley Potts after lunch. Potts is reluctant to speak to cops, more afraid of the people he works for than the police. Cletus does all he can to threaten Potts. When that does not work, Dave asks for a moment alone with Potts. Potts tells Dave that he was at a party at Julio Segura, a Nicaraguan drug dealer's, house and overheard that Segura wanted Dave killed because of the investigation into the girl he found in Cataouatche Parish.

Chapter 1 Analysis

This chapter introduces Dave Robicheaux. Dave is a cop who seems to be as tough as he is honest. Dave found the body of a young girl and even though she was found outside his jurisdiction, Dave keeps tabs on the investigation in order to find out what happened to the girl. Most cops would step back and let the locals take care of a case such as this one, but Dave is determined that this girl's death be ruled homicide and her killers prosecuted. This shows Dave is a moral person. At the same time, Dave learns some people want him dead for interfering with this investigation. Not only does this suggest future trouble for Dave, it also points to the idea that Dave's instincts that this girl was murdered are right on.

In this chapter, the reader is also introduced to Cletus Purcel. Cletus is Dave's partner, an unhappily married man, who seems concerned that his heavy drinking is quickly turning into a problem. Cletus's worry about this possibility seems to suggest two things to the reader. First, that Cletus knows he is becoming an alcoholic and is open to help in



stopping. Second, this suggests that Cletus is an unstable guy who could find himself acting impulsively and without thought. Cletus's concerns about his drinking foreshadows a time later in the novel where Cletus might prove himself to be less than honorable.



Chapter 2

Chapter 2 Summary

The following day Dave drives out to Cataouatche Parish to talk with the local sheriff. Dave insists that the sheriff order an autopsy, but the sheriff is equally insistent that the girl drowned, and there is no reason to put her family through the ordeal of an autopsy. Dave goes to visit the girl's parents and learns that she lived in New Orleans where she was making a large amount of money and made promises to her parents about moving them to New York. However, the girl's father has no idea who the girl worked for or where she got her money. On the way back to New Orleans, Dave is pulled over by a couple of sheriff deputies. The men make threats against Dave and attempt to arrest him. However, Dave gets the better of the two men and handcuffs them to their front bumper. Dave then flags down a passing car because his car now has a flat tire due to some glass on the road. A young woman stops and picks Dave up but refuses to leave with him until the deputies agree that he is a New Orleans police officer. Dave takes the young woman to lunch and has her speak to Cletus in order to further relieve her fears regarding his identity.

The next day, Dave talks with a cop in vice that he dislikes, Sergeant Motley, and learns that the murdered girl worked for Segura but disappeared a few weeks ago. Motley heard the girl moved in with Segura. Dave then talks to his captain and gets the go-ahead to speak with Segura. Dave and Cletus go to Segura's house and speak to him for a few minutes about the girl and the threats against Dave. Segura denies knowing the girl but accuses Cletus of using his badge to get free services from prostitutes. Dave asks Cletus about it afterward and is assured that the accusation is based on half-truths. Cletus had a thing with a prostitute a few years ago, but it was mutual and had nothing to do with her profession. Dave believes him.

Chapter 2 Analysis

Dave goes to Cataouatche Parish to talk with the sheriff, but finds him uncooperative. In fact, the man sends a couple deputies to harass Dave, telling him that the sheriff is not completely honest. Dave suspects that the girl's killers are paying the sheriff to investigate as little as possible. This touches on the theme of good versus evil and Dave's sense that he is the last good guy left in Louisiana. Dave is saved from the unpleasant deputies when a pretty woman happens to come along at the right time. Dave assures the woman that he is a good guy and then asks her on a date. This date ensures that the woman will reappear in the novel, most likely taking on a significant role in Dave's life.

Dave learns the murdered girl came into a large amount of money before her death, suggesting from her poor roots that she was into something illegal. Dave also learns that the girl worked for Julio Segura. Since Segura's name continuously comes up in



this investigation, Dave decides to go speak to him. The meeting goes nowhere since Segura knows there is nothing Dave and Cletus can do without a warrant, but Segura does make accusations against Cletus. Cletus denies the accusations, but the reader already knows that Cletus most likely has a drinking problem; therefore, it does not seem to be a big stretch for him to also be abusing his badge in order to get free favors from prostitutes.



Chapter 3

Chapter 3 Summary

Dave arrives at Annie's and does not notice the three men behind him until it is too late. These men force their way into Annie's house. The men tie Annie up and then take Dave into the bathroom where they have filled the bathtub with water. One of the men, an older man with glasses, asks Dave where Fitzpatrick is. Dave does not know. Another man pushes Dave's head under water and holds him there until he nearly drowns. When they pull him out of the water, the man again asks Dave where Fitzpatrick is. Dave still does not know. Before they can put him in the water again, Annie manages to get her ankles free and make noise to attract the neighbors. The three men leave but promise they will be back. The police come and take a report, but Dave knows nothing will come of it. Dave stays the night with Annie, sleeping on the couch.

The next morning, Dave gets a call from his half-brother, Jimmy. Jimmy wants Dave to come have lunch with him and a local mobster, Gigi Dee, with whom Jimmy is friendly. Dave reluctantly agrees. Gigi Dee tells Dave that the girl Dave found in the lake while fishing was one of Segura's prostitutes for whom he developed an affection. Segura moved the girl into his house until he got tired of her. Segura sent the girl packing, but she began spreading word that she knew about some secret deals Segura was working on, having to do with elephants or some other nonsense. Segura had the girl killed in order to keep her mouth shut. Dave already knew most of this, but thanks Gigi Dee just the same.

Chapter 3 Analysis

Dave is attacked by three men who want to know where someone named Fitzpatrick is. Dave has no idea what these men are talking about, so he can do little to protect himself and Annie. Annie, however, proves herself to be a smart and brave girl and gets her feet loose and breaks a lamp in order to attract the neighbors, essentially saving Dave's life a second time. Dave is grateful to Annie and does his best to make her feel more secure after their ordeal. This situation brings these two people together, suggesting that Annie will continue to be a part of Dave's life. This section also introduces three people who feel no fear in taking two people captive in their own home, suggesting to the reader that these criminals are fearless and determined to do what they need to do to protect themselves. This tells the reader that these three men will return as the novel continues to develop, illustrating the theme of good versus evil each time they come up against Dave.

Dave's brother is friends with a local mobster. This is a relationship that Dave does not approve of, but can do nothing to end. Jimmy invites Dave to lunch with this mobster, Gigi Dee, so that Gigi can give Dave some information about the men trying to kill Dave.



What this man tells Dave is basically everything he already knows about the girl, with the exception of the information the girl talked about, something to do with elephants. This is new information to Dave, but does not help prove Segura's role in the girl's death. However, this does introduce Jimmy and Gigi Dee to the plot. Jimmy and Dave are close, loving brothers. Unfortunately, with friends like Gigi Dee, Jimmy is asking for trouble and the reader is anxious to read further and find out what kind of trouble that is.



Chapters 4-5

Chapters 4-5 Summary

Sam Fitzpatrick, an agent with the treasury department, shows up at Dave's houseboat that night. Dave and Sam go to a local restaurant for sandwiches where Fitzpatrick tells Dave about a gun deal he has been investigating that involves people around Segura and Nicaragua. Fitzpatrick insists that he does not want Dave involved and apologizes that Dave took abuse that was meant for him. However, Dave quickly gets the impression that Fitzpatrick wants Dave's help. The next morning, Dave decides to arrest Segura on the pretext of interviewing him about the girl's death but with the real intention of getting information on the three men who attacked Dave and Annie. Unfortunately, the arrest does not go well. Dave and Cletus stop Segura's Cadillac as it is driving down the street outside his house begin talking to them. Cletus grabs the bodyguard's nose, causing the bodyguard to go for a gun. Both the bodyguard and Segura are killed when Cletus and Dave are forced to draw their own weapons.

Dave files his report, leaving out the fact that Cletus provoked the shooting. Dave's captain warns him not to stick his neck out for Cletus anymore. Fitzpatrick calls and asks to meet Dave. Fitzpatrick suggests that Cletus might have wanted Segura killed because Cletus has been using Segura's prostitutes and Segura knew about it. They discuss a young woman who has agreed to tell Fitzpatrick about some of the people involved in the arms deal. One of these men is a guy named Bobby Joe Starkweather, one of the men who attacked Dave and Annie. Dave takes the girl's address and promises to check her out. The next day, Dave tries to call Fitzpatrick at his office but learns he is missing. Dave then checks out the girl Fitzpatrick told him about but finds her gone as well. Dave returns to his houseboat where the three guys from the night at Annie's are waiting for him.

Chapters 4-5 Analysis

Dave learns that Fitzpatrick is a real person when he shows up at his boat. Fitzpatrick tells Dave he works for the treasury department, but when Dave hears that Fitzpatrick is working on a case dealing with weapons making their way to Nicaragua, Dave begins to think that Fitzpatrick more likely works for the ATF. Dave does not like Fitzpatrick at first because the agent tries to make Dave think that he is sorry that Dave got drawn into this situation, but makes it clear that he would not mind Dave's kind of help in the investigation. However, Dave begins to change his mind when Fitzpatrick gives Dave some information that he can use to find the men who attacked him and Annie.

Dave and Cletus attempt to arrest Segura, but the arrest goes wrong and Segura ends up dead. Fitzpatrick tells Dave that Cletus had reason to want Segura dead and Dave's captain tells him that he should not back Cletus up. These two warnings tell the reader

that Cletus is involved in some things he should not be and staying close to him could cause Dave to become wrapped up in it, too.



Chapters 6-7

Chapters 6-7 Summary

Dave wakes in a strange garage, strapped to a table. Tied to a chair beside him is a badly beaten Fitzpatrick. The man with the glasses from the attack at Annie's, Philip Murphy, is there, along with a small Israeli man and a Nicaraguan. Murphy talks to Dave, attempting to frighten him by telling him stories about Nicaragua and the war there. In the middle of this conversation, Bobby Joe Starkweather walks in with alcohol. Bobby Joe puts the alcohol in a jar along with some drugs and forces Dave to drink it through a funnel. Dave hallucinates, reliving some difficult moments in Vietnam. The four men then take Dave and Fitzpatrick and place them in Dave's car and put the car into gear and allow it to crash out of the parking garage onto the street three floors below. Dave is knocked clear of the car, but Fitzpatrick is stuck inside when the car bursts into flames. The next morning in the hospital, Dave is visited by two detectives from internal affairs. These men inform Dave he is being investigated for causing the accident that killed Fitzpatrick. No one believes Dave's story about the men led by Murphy because of Dave's past history with alcohol. Even Dave's captain does not believe it. Dave is suspended from active duty. Dave goes home where he meets up with Annie. Dave tries to stay with her, but finds himself drawn back into the world he thought he walked away from four years before.

Dave goes to a bar and drinks with a bunch of sideshow freaks who are waiting for their bus to be repaired. From the bar, Dave calls the CIA, making threats and harassing the duty officer. Dave spends the next day drinking on his boat before going to see Wesley Pitts again. Pitts tells Dave where he can find Starkweather. Dave drives out to Starkweather's fish camp and breaks into the house, finding only a prostitute inside. The girl tells Dave that Starkweather went out back a few minutes before with another man. Dave goes outside and discovers Starkweather dead in the pig pen. Dave also finds evidence that the killer dug his bullet casing out of the mud. Dave asks the girl what the man with Starkweather looked like and gets a clear description of Cletus Purcel. Dave calls the local sheriff and then returns to his boat. Dave calls Fitzpatrick's supervisor and asks about a man named Abshire that he heard Murphy mention before the car accident. Fitzpatrick's supervisor is not willing to share information with Dave, but lets slip that Abshire is a general. Dave then calls Cletus and sounds him out on Starkweather's murder, but Cletus does not let anything slip.

Chapters 6-7 Analysis

The theme of alcoholism is introduced in these chapters. Dave is a recovering alcoholic, something that was mentioned in the first chapter of the novel. Now Dave has been kidnapped and force fed alcohol in order to stage an accident that will appear to be Dave's fault. Unfortunately for the bad guys, Dave does not die. However, the accident causes internal affairs to assume Dave has begun drinking again and suspend him from



the job. At this point, Dave had a choice to stay sober and allow the process to work itself out until he was found innocent. Or, Dave could have attempted to clear his name, but again, by staying sober and doing his job. However, Dave chose the option to begin drinking again. The taste of the alcohol and its affect on his body woke a monster in Dave which is unable to control. Dave has slipped into the bottle once more, bringing into question all his actions while he is drunk.

Dave goes in search of the men who ruined his career. First on his list is Bobby Joe Starkweather. Dave returns to Wesley Pitts, the man who told him about the price on his head originally, who tells him where Starkweather has a fish camp. Dave goes to the camp only to find that someone killed Starkweather. The description of the killer appears to fit Cletus, but when Dave questions Cletus about it, he does not get any clear answers. The reader has suspected all along that Cletus had turned the corner and become a bad cop. Finally, Dave learns the name of the man he believes to be Murphy's boss. This man, Abshire, is someone Murphy spoke about while Dave was being held captive. Dave mentions this name to Fitzpatrick's supervisor and learns he is a General. Now Dave has another avenue to investigate.



Chapter 8

Chapter 8 Summary

Dave goes to Annie's to apologize for leaving her alone the night he was released from the hospital and finds her angry and worried. Dave tells her what has been going on, including his drinking, and promises to never hurt her again. Dave then goes to the morgue of the local newspaper and searches through it for stories about Abshire. Dave finds several stories about the General that make him out to be a local hero. Of particular interest, Dave also finds stories about Abshire's son, a young soldier who became a prisoner of war in Vietnam and is thought to be one of two American soldiers forced to lay mines in rice paddies that later resulted in the deaths in an American military company. These deaths led to a Lieutenant ordering the massacre of an entire Vietnamese village at My Lai. This information leads Dave to recall a time while he was in Vietnam when two of his fellow soldiers drowned because they were teasing a buffalo that had gotten stuck in a river.

From the newspaper, Dave goes to a bar near the General's house. Dave asks the bartender about the General and learns that the son used to frequent the bar. Dave decides to go visit the General. Dave drives past his house and sees that he is having a party. Dave crashes the party and tries to talk to the General, but the local police arrive and arrest him. Dave is booked at the local jail for carrying a concealed weapon. Dave spends the night in the drunk tank. The next morning, Motley moves Dave into a private cell to protect him from the other inmates. Dave is arraigned, but bail is set too high, so he settles down at the jail. Later that afternoon, Annie bails him out after receiving a phone call from Cletus about the arrest.

Chapter 8 Analysis

Dave does some research on Abshire and learns that he is an honored military man who had a son who served in Vietnam. The only thing of interest about Abshire is that his son is rumored to have been one of two American prisoners who laid mines in rice paddies that would later kill a large number of American soldiers, leading to the massacre at My Lai. The reader is not clear on why this information is presented at this point, other than the direct relation to Dave's personal service in Vietnam, but suspects it might be a motive for Abshire's connection to Murphy and his friends.

Dave goes to the Abshire's house and gets himself arrested. Dave is put in the drunk tank, but Motley moves him the next day. Motley is a man that Dave does not like, but discovers that Motley knows exactly what Dave is going through and feels some pity for him. Dave accepts Motley's kindness. Dave is charged with carrying a concealed weapon, a charge that could end his career. However, Dave's biggest concern is his lack of alcohol. The reader does take notice that Dave politely refuses an offer to drink

from both a fellow drunk in the drunk tank and from Annie, suggesting that Dave might have finally learned his lesson about alcohol.



Chapter 9

Chapter 9 Summary

Jimmy calls Dave the following morning and chastises him for not calling while he was in jail. Jimmy tells Dave to get a Spanish interpreter because Didi Gee is sending over a gift. When Didi's men arrive, they bring with them the Nicaraguan that helped Murphy set Dave up for the car accident. Dave tapes the man confessing to the whole arrangement and then takes him to his police precinct. Before arriving, Dave calls the detective in internal affairs who is investigating his case and arranges for him to meet him at the station. The detective meets him there, but fails to see the importance in the tape Dave gives him. The detective also does not see the point in keeping the Nicaraguan. Dave becomes frustrated and insists that the man interview the Nicaraguan to help solve the murder of Fitzpatrick. When the man continues to resist, Dave hits him. Dave then leaves. Dave runs into Cletus outside and tells him that he knows about Starkweather. Cletus resists Dave's lecture, insisting that what he did was right. Later when Dave calls Fitzpatrick's supervisor to find out if he knows about the Nicaraguan, the supervisor informs him that the man was killed in county lockup.

Chapter 9 Analysis

Didi Gee sends the Nicaraguan to Dave to use as proof of his story about the car accident. Dave takes the man's statement on tape before taking him to the police station. However, once at the police station it is pretty clear no one wants to talk to the man or is willing to believe his story. Dave seems to be wasting his time trying to convince these people of his innocence. This touches on two of the main themes of the novel. First, alcoholism. If not for Dave's prior drinking problem, he would most likely not be having the trouble he is now. No one would believe Dave capable of causing the accident if it were not for his prior history with alcohol. Second, good versus evil. Dave once again appears to be the only moral cop left in the world. When the reader learns that the Nicaraguan was killed in jail, it seems to underscore this impression.



Chapter 10

Chapter 10 Summary

Dave begins attending AA meetings while following up on some of the information the Nicaraguan gave him. One of these leads was mention of a warehouse. Dave checks country records for a warehouse owned by Wineburger, a shady lawyer who worked for Segura and was also at General Abshire's house. Unfortunately, Dave does not find anything fitting the specifications. Dave stops to have some breakfast and is met on the street by one of Didi Gee's men. Didi wants to see Dave. Dave reluctantly agrees when he learns it has to do with Murphy. At lunch, Didi tells Dave where he can find Murphy. At the same time, Didi tells Dave that Didi thinks he (Didi) is about to be indicted. Didi has decided to leave New Orleans and go to San Antonio and see a doctor who might have other treatments for his colon cancer besides the surgery his current doctor wants to perform. Dave returns to his houseboat and goes for a swim. When he returns, Dave gets a call from his captain informing him that Jimmy has been shot. Dave rushes to the hospital and discovers that Jimmy was shot twice in the head while using a public restroom. There was a witness, but he has not identified anyone yet.

Dave stays at the hospital all night until he is allowed to see Jimmy. Jimmy tries to speak but cannot. Instead, Jimmy writes something on Dave's chest with his finger, but the effort takes all his energy and he quickly falls back to sleep. The captain thinks Jimmy told Dave something, but Dave insists he did not. Dave then goes home and saws off the barrel of a shotgun his father gave him before he went to college and then goes to Mississippi where Didi told him he could find Murphy. Murphy has a drug problem and Didi gave Dave the location of Murphy's supplier. Dave goes to the supplier and finds out where Murphy lives, then burns down the supplier's house. Dave goes to Murphy's house and tricks him into coming outside and pulls his shotgun on him. Dave forces Murphy back into the house where he questions him. Murphy insists that he did not shoot Jimmy but tells Dave he (Murphy) checked out Annie. Murphy tells Dave that Annie was promiscuous and once got pregnant. The pregnancy was unwanted, so Annie forced an abortion by riding a horse. Dave ignores this information and tells Murphy to get dressed. Murphy requests a trip to the bathroom, which Dave grants. Murphy pulls a gun out of the toilet tank and attempts to shoot Dave. Dave fires first, killing Murphy and leaving him dead in the shower.

Chapter 10 Analysis

While Dave is embracing his new sobriety and searching for evidence to connect Segura's lawyer to a warehouse the Nicaraguan mentioned, Dave is invited to lunch with Didi. The reader sees Dave's reluctance and it confirms the sense the reader has had all along of Dave's character. Dave has received gifts and information from Didi, yet he is still reluctant to embrace the mobster as a friend; however, Dave agrees to go when he learns the meeting is about Murphy. Dave's desire to get revenge on Murphy



and to clear his name is stronger than his fear of corrupting his moral base by spending time with Didi. Didi tells Dave that he is about to be indicted. This comes as no surprise to the reader who might believe that a criminal deserves to go to jail; however, the way it is presented suggests it might be relevant later in the novel.

Shortly after lunch, Dave learns that his brother was shot. Dave is deeply concerned about his brother and determined to find out who did this. Dave asks Jimmy who shot him, asking if it was Murphy, but Jimmy is unable to talk. Jimmy writes something on Dave's chest, but the reader is unclear what this might have been, if anything. It could be important later. Dave goes to Mississippi where he tracks down Murphy. Dave does not share with the reader what he intends to do with Murphy. The reader believes that Dave suspects Murphy shot his brother, however, and wonders if Dave is not after revenge. Dave decides to take Murphy back to New Orleans in order to clear his name, but Murphy pulls a gun. Dave is forced to kill him. The reader wonders how this will affect Dave, since he is such a moral man. Dave did not want to kill him, but was left with little choice.



Chapter 11

Chapter 11 Summary

Dave goes to Annie and tells her everything that has happened, including Jimmy and Murphy. Annie explains the abortion Murphy accused her of because she does not want there to be lies between her and Dave. Dave then goes to his captain to turn himself in. The captain calls Mississippi and has a cop go to the address Dave gave him. However, the Mississippi cop does not find anything. Dave also tells his captain about his belief that Cletus killed Starkweather, of which the captain is not surprised. Dave also asks if the captain is aware that the prosecutor is indicting Didi. The captain is not aware but would not be surprised if they were doing it behind closed doors to keep the whole thing quiet. Finally, the captain tells Dave the concealed weapons charge against him has been dropped. The next day, Dave begins following Cletus. Dave sees Cletus stop at the bus station on his way to work and on his way home. Dave goes to Cletus's house that night and tells him he has his gun, suspecting that Cletus' wife makes him keep the gun at the bus station. Dave is right, Cletus falls for the rouse and confesses to killing Starkweather. Cletus says he did it for ten thousand dollars. Dave is disgusted, leaving Cletus aware of his disgust.

Chapter 11 Analysis

Annie proves her character and her depth of feeling to Dave when she explains to him the story Murphy told him about her past. Dave never really doubted Annie, but she did not want lies between them, suggesting that she hopes there will be a long term relationship for them. Dave, in turn, is honest with her and tells her the truth about killing Murphy. Dave then goes to his Captain and confesses his crimes, once again proving his strength of character. Dave is a moral man and wants to set the story straight. However, it turns out that someone got rid of Murphy's body, making the whole scenario Dave's word against an empty house.

Dave confront Cletus about killing Starkweather. Cletus admits the murder when he believes that Dave has evidence against him. The reader finally sees Cletus's true motivations and learns about his attraction to young prostitutes. It seems everything everyone has been telling Dave about Cletus proved to be true. Dave does not turn Cletus in, showing his loyalty to his partner even as he tells Cletus not to call him partner again. Dave is a good man and he feels the need to protect someone he once respected, even now that the loyalty is no longer deserved.



Chapter 12 and Epilogue

Chapter 12 and Epilogue Summary

Jimmy has surgery and the doctor is optimistic he will have a full recovery. Dave's Captain comes to see him on his boat and tells Dave that a cop in Ft. Lauderdale contacted him to let him know a contract killer who operates down there was rumored to be in New Orleans. The Captain showed a picture of the killer to the witness and the boy identified him as Jimmy's shooter. The Captain suspects Didi Gee is behind the shooting, and Dave confirms this by admitting that Jimmy traced a d and a g on his chest that first morning in the hospital. The Captain makes Dave promise he will not take justice into his own hands but informs him that Jimmy was about to be indicted with the hopes that he would turn on Didi Gee. Dave makes the promise to his Captain but immediately goes back on it. Dave fills a bag with bolts and heavy nuts before going to Didi's place of business. Dave beats Didi's men and then chases after Didi but stops when it is clear he has made his point. Soon afterward, Didi undergoes surgery for his colon cancer, leaving him very ill and waiting for death.

Dave goes to visit General Abshire. Dave tells the man that he knows what motivated him to give weapons to the Nicaraguans. Dave believes that it had to do with his son's possible involvement in the My Lai massacre. Dave also tells the General that the Feds found Wineburger's warehouse and confiscated all the weapons. Dave expects the Feds will serve a warrant on the General very soon. Not long afterward, Dave learns that he has been cleared of all charges by the internal affairs investigation. Dave takes three weeks of vacation immediately after his reinstatement, spending two of those weeks in Florida with Annie. When Dave is expected to return to work, he chooses to take his retirement. Dave and Annie move to Dave's hometown of New Iberia. Cletus emptied out his wife's bank account and left the country, sending Dave a postcard from Guatemala.

Chapter 12 and Epilogue Analysis

Dave finds out that Didi Gee was behind Jimmy's shooting. Dave now knows that Didi Gee inviting him to dinner was a ruse to give Didi Gee a strong alibi for Jimmy's shooting and allowed him to use Dave to provide the alibi for him. Didi Gee is playing games with Dave, perhaps to get revenge on Jimmy for possibly turning against him. Dave has the final word, however. Dave attacks Didi Gee in his business until Didi Gee is frightened and begins to fear for his life. Shortly afterward, Didi Gee has surgery for his colon cancer, a cancer that is so advanced that he will most likely die. Dave thinks this is appropriate revenge for what Didi Gee did to his family.

Dave is cleared from all charges and reinstated at the police department; however, Dave decides he no longer wants to work with the New Orleans police department. Dave retires and takes Annie home to New Iberia. At the same time, Cletus takes off



with all his wife's money. The parallel between these two partners is striking, but like the theme of good versus evil, it is clear who is running and who has made a choice that is appropriate for him. Life goes on and Dave knows this, deciding to share what is left of his life away from criminals and with the woman he loves. Cletus is simply running.



Characters

Dave Robicheaux

Dave Robicheaux is a detective with the New Orleans police department. Dave grew up in the south of the Louisiana bayou, the son of a Cajun. Dave recalls his father as a wise man even though he could not read or write. Dave draws on his father's advice often throughout this novel, allowing his father to guide him years after his death. Dave is a moral man who attempts to stick to his morals when it comes to dealing with criminals but finds that he sometimes has to compromise his morals in order to do what he thinks is right.

Dave found the body of a young girl while fishing in a neighboring parish. Dave is concerned that this girl was murdered, so he follows up with the local sheriff's office. Unfortunately, it is clear this sheriff is not interested in learning the truth about the girl's death. However, a threat against Dave's life because of this investigation leads Dave to Julio Segura, a drug dealer in New Orleans. Dave and his partner, Cletus Purcell, try to arrest Segura in order to question him, but the arrest goes wrong and Segura ends up dead.

At the same time, Dave is being pursued by three men who are involved in a deal to supply weapons to Nicaragua. These men believe Dave knows how to locate a federal agent named Fitzpatrick, but Dave does not meet this agent until after his first encounter with the three hitmen. The second time Dave meets the three men, he is fed alcohol and put into a car with Fitzpatrick, and the car is allowed to drive out of a parking garage and fall three stories to the street below. Because Dave has a history with alcohol, no one believes his story about the three men, even when Dave brings one of the men in to the station. Dave goes out on his own to prove his innocence, only to decide working for the New Orleans police department is no longer something he wants anymore.

Cletus Purcel

Cletus Purcell is Dave's partner. Cletus is in an unhappy marriage and has developed a drinking problem. Cletus worries about his alcohol consumption to Dave, an alcoholic, and asks how one knows he is becoming an alcoholic. When Dave and Cletus go out to Segura's house to talk to him about the dead girl in a neighboring parish, Dave finds out Cletus has been visiting prostitutes and using his badge to get services for free. Dave questions Cletus about this, and Cletus assures Dave he (Cletus) is not abusing his badge, but Dave later finds out that Cletus lied to him. Cletus is becoming dangerous, pushing situations he should not push. Dave wants to arrest Segura to force him to tell where the three men who attacked Dave and Annie might be, but Cletus pushes Segura's bodyguard until the man pulls a gun. A shootout ensues and Segura is killed.



Dave continues to hear things about Cletus he does not like. When Dave goes to find one of the men who attacked him and learns that Cletus was with the man moments before he died, Dave knows Cletus was hired to kill the man. Dave talks to Cletus about it and learns that in fact he was paid to kill the man by one of the man's own partners. Cletus claims he only took the job to pay some bills he had gotten behind on. Dave does not believe him and thinks that once a cop has gone bad, there is no turning back. A short time later, Cletus empties his bank account and runs away, sending Dave a cryptic postcard from Guatemala.

Philip Murphy

Philip Murphy is a mild-mannered appearing man who could pass for an English professor. In truth, Murphy is a CIA agent with a drug addiction. Murphy is the leader of a group of men who are hired to get rid of Dave after he begins asking questions about a girl he found dead in a neighboring parish. Murphy and two men follow Dave as he arrives at Annie Ballard's house and the men force their way into the house. Murphy then tells Dave that he wants to know where someone named Fitzgerald is. When Dave says he does not know, which he does not, Murphy allows one of his associates to push Dave's head into a bathtub full of water. The men continue this routine until Annie manages to get the attention of some neighbors. The men leave, but promise to return.

A short time later, Dave runs into Murphy and his friends again. Dave returns home to find these men waiting for him in his houseboat. They inject Dave with drugs and then kidnap him. The men then force feed Dave alcohol and drugs before placing him behind the wheel of his car and allowing it to fall three stories to the street below. Dave is a recovering alcoholic; therefore, no one believes his story. Dave then begins an investigation on his own, attempting to find Murphy and his associates. Dave finds one associate dead. Sometime later, Dave is told where he can find Murphy. When Dave attempts to take Murphy back to New Orleans, Murphy pulls a gun on him, forcing Dave to kill him.

Johnny Massina

Johnny Massina is a convict who is on death row for the murder of a young woman. Johnny knows Dave. Dave once used Johnny as a snitch and also attempted to help Johnny stop his drug addiction. On the day Johnny is scheduled to die, Johnny asks Dave to visit him at the prison. Johnny talks to Dave about Dave's brother and people they both know. Then Johnny tells Dave that Dave had always been good to him, so he wants to return the favor. Johnny tells Dave that he has heard a rumor that some men are planning to kill Dave. Johnny says that Dave has upset some people while investigating a case, and he should watch his back. Dave uses this information to find out who might be after him, discovering that it all goes back to the body of a young girl he found in a lake while fishing.



Julio Segura

Julio Segura runs drugs and prostitutes in New Orleans. Segura is from Nicaragua, a refugee from the fighting taking place there during the time period in which the novel is written. Dave and Cletus go to Segura to question him about the threats made against Dave's life. During this visit, Dave learns that Cletus has been using his badge to get favors from prostitutes. Cletus defends himself against these accusations, but Dave sees that Cletus is no longer the moral cop he once was and wonders how true Segura's claims are.

Dave decides he wants to bring Segura into the police station to question him about the girl he found dead while fishing, having learned that the girl worked for Segura and lived with him for a time. However, the bust goes bad and Segura gets shot after Cletus annoys Segura's bodyguard to the point where the bodyguard pulls a gun on him.

Didi Gee

Didi Gee is a mobster who lives in New Orleans. Didi Gee runs most of the criminal activity in New Orleans and a neighboring parish. Didi Gee is a friend of Jimmy Robineaux, Dave's brother. When Dave learns about the threat against his life, his brother calls him and tells him that Didi Gee might have some information about it. Didi and Dave meet, with Didi telling Dave about Segura. Dave already knows most of what Didi tells him, learning only that the girl Segura had killed knew something about a weapons deal Segura was working on which is why she was killed.

Later Didi arranges for Dave to meet with one of the men who set Dave up for the murder of Fitzpatrick. Due to Didi's previous help, Dave agrees to meet with Didi when he promises to tell Dave where Murphy can be found. However, Dave later learns that Didi set up the meeting regarding Murphy in order to keep Dave distracted while Didi had his brother shot. This also provides Didi an alibi to the shooting. Dave is not able to let Didi's actions go unpunished, however. Dave goes to Didi's place of business and beats him with a bag filled with heavy nuts and bolts. Afterward, Didi is hospitalized due to an untreated Colon cancer. Dave feels Didi got what he deserved when he loses a great deal of weight and has to undergo surgery to treat his cancer.

Wesley Potts

Wesley Potts is a low level enforcer in Segura's business. Wesley is also brother to a man at Angola who tells Johnny Massina about a plot to kill Dave. When Cletus hears Potts' name, he recognizes him as an old neighbor and takes Dave to talk to him. Cletus threatens Potts to try to get him to tell them about the hit out on Dave, but Potts refuses to speak until Dave sends Cletus away and speaks to Potts with some measure of respect. Finally Potts tells Dave that Segura wants him dead for interfering in the investigation of the murder of the young woman Dave found while he was fishing.



Sometime later, Dave returns to Potts place of business to find out where one of Murphy's people lives. After learning the location, Dave finds Potts already dead.

Annie Ballard

Annie Ballard is a beautiful, young social worker who happens to drive down the right road at the right time to save Dave's life. Dave is nearly arrested on a fake charge by two sheriff's deputies in a nearby parish when he manages to turn the tables on the two men and handcuff them to the bumper of their own car. Dave's car has a flat tire, so he flags down a passing car for a ride back to New Orleans. Annie Ballard is the driver of that car. Dave asks Annie for a date that night. When Dave arrives at her home to pick her up for the date, three men force their way into Annie's house. The men tie Annie up and then torture Dave to learn the location of a man he does not know. Annie again saves Dave's life when she makes a noise to attract her neighbors. Annie and Dave begin dating steadily. Annie bails Dave out of jail when he is arrested for carrying a concealed weapon. Dave falls deeply in love with Annie and takes her with him when he decides to leave the New Orleans area.

Sam Fitzpatrick

Sam Fitzpatrick is a federal agent who tells Dave he works for the treasury department, but Dave suspects he really works for the ATF. Fitzpatrick is investigating the sale of American weapons to people in Nicaragua. This investigation has led Fitzpatrick to Segura and the men who attacked Dave. Fitzpatrick is the federal agent that Murphy and his men believe Dave knows and can locate for them. Fitzpatrick then tells Dave about the weapons deal and how he hopes that Dave will keep his nose out of the investigation long enough for Fitzpatrick to make a bust; however, Dave suspects Fitzpatrick wants Dave's help. Later, Dave is kidnapped and discovers Fitzpatrick has also been kidnapped by the same men. Dave is placed in his car, behind the wheel, after the kidnappers force him to drink alcohol mixed with drugs. The car is then driven out of a parking garage to the street three stories below. Fitzpatrick is killed.

General Jerome Abshire

General Abshire had a son who was taken prisoner of war in Vietnam and forced to lay mines across a rice paddy that later killed a squad of American soldiers. This incident led to the My Lai Massacre. Abshire is consumed by guilt, partly because his son would never have been in the military if not for him and partly because his son was involved in such an ugly incident. This guilt leads Abshire to participate in a deal to send weapons to Nicaragua. Abshire is behind the deal that Segura killed a young black girl over, bringing Dave into the story and causing the deaths of Segura, Murphy, and several others.



Objects/Places

Segura's Cadillac

Cletus and Dave pull over Segura's Cadillac with the idea of arresting Segura in order to force him to tell Dave where the men who threatened him can be found, but instead a gun fight breaks out. Segura and his bodyguard are killed.

Segura's House

Dave and Cletus visit Segura at his house to ask him about the murdered girl in Cataouatche Parish. Afterward, Dave is threatened by three men while visiting Annie at her house.

Dave's Car

Dave's car is wrecked when Murphy and his friends force Dave to drink alcohol and then place him in the car with Fitzpatrick before putting the car in gear and allowing it to drive three stories out of a parking garage.

Dave's Houseboat

Dave lives in a houseboat he keeps docked on a lake in New Orleans.

Boilermakers

Boilermakers, a shot of whiskey followed by beer, is Dave's drink of choice.

Dr. Nut

Dr. Nut is a soda similar to Dr. Pepper that Dave remembers fondly from his childhood.

Shotgun

Dave saws off the barrel of a shotgun his father gave him before he went to college in order to hide it under his jacket when he goes to confront Murphy.



General Abshire's House

Dave goes to General Abshire's house and crashes a party in the hopes of getting some information that can help clear him in the IAD investigation regarding Fitzpatrick's death. Instead, Dave is arrested for carrying a concealed weapon.

Warehouse

Dave helps the feds discover a warehouse where General Abshire has collected weapons to send to Nicaragua.

My Lai Massacre

The My Lai Massacre was the massacre of a village of people in Vietnam in retaliation for the mining deaths of a squad of American soldiers.

Angola

Angola is a penitentiary in Louisiana. Dave goes to Angola to visit Johnny Massina, a man he once tried to help shake a drug habit who is about to be executed for throwing a girl out a hotel window.

Cataouatche Parish

Dave finds the body of a murdered girl while fishing in Cataouatche Parish.

New Orleans

Dave Robicheaux is a police detective in New Orleans, Louisiana. New Orleans is a city rich in different cultures, including French and Cajun. Dave is the son of a Cajun man.

Nicaragua

Nicaragua is a country that was in the depths of civil war in the eighties. General Abshire arranges to send weapons to this country in order to soothe his feelings of guilt over his son's role in the My Lai Massacre.

Vietnam

Vietnam is a country near Cambodia where there was a war in the sixties and seventies. Dave served a year in Vietnam. General Abshire's son was a prisoner of war

in Vietnam and reportedly was forced to lay mines in a rice paddy that later led to the deaths of several American soldiers and directly contributed to the massacre at My Lai.



Social Sensitivity

James Lee Burke's *The Neon Rain* opens with Lieutenant Dave Robicheaux, a New Orleans homicide detective, at Angola penitentiary visiting a career criminal on death row for murder. The criminal, Johnny Massina, recognizes his debt to the world—and to Robicheaux, who "always treated [him] decent"—and hopes to even up what he can here before having to pay "some heavy dues . . . on the other side." Therefore, after making full confession to a priest, Massina warns Robicheaux that "the Columbians" intend to kill him for his involvement in an investigation—although neither Massina nor Robicheaux know which investigation has incited their ire. Massina, though fearful, has resigned himself to his fate despite his protestations of innocence.

Although he claims not to have committed the murder for which the state will execute him, he reasons that enough of his other crimes have gone unpunished to justify this penalty. Thus, in the opening scene in the novel, Burke has introduced most of the major elements of his message. These range from the corrupt nature of government institutions, and, by association, United States policy in Central America, to the question of the place of God and man in a modern, fallen world.

Burke indicts not only a government that employs criminals but also the law enforcement agencies that attempt, in a systemized manner, to keep those same criminals in check. Massina did not, in fact, commit the crime for which he receives the death penalty; the guilty man—Bobby Joe Starkweather—dies at the hands of Robicheaux's partner, Cletus Purcel, a rogue cop turned assassin. Purcel kills Starkweather and feeds the body to Starkweather's own pigs for \$10,000 before fleeing the country for Central America, where he becomes a mercenary. And Robicheaux evinces little surprise at learning that criminals have compromised an entire rural sheriff's department or that a number of New Orleans police officers have accepted bribes of either cash or sexual favors.

Although Purcel, who may also have extorted sexual favors from a prostitute, represents the extreme of institutional corruption, Robicheaux admits that even honest cops only catch stupid or unlucky criminals, and that the institution of police work fails at its intended function. In fact, the only criminal to serve any jail time in the novel only does so because Robicheaux, who has been suspended from the force at this point, disobeys orders and brings him in. However, the prisoner, a potential witness against a number of U.S. government employees, dies at the hands of fellow prisoners during his first night in custody. The other criminals in the novel—and there are many of them—receive justice on an individual basis from police detectives, suspended police detectives, or each other. At the end of the novel, General Abshire, a retired two-star who has lead the criminal organization, expects arrest and imprisonment, and Robicheaux predicts that "they'll be out here" to arrest him that day or the next. But we never see Abshire in custody, even in the epilogue to the novel that summarizes the dispositions of other major characters, and Burke leaves us to wonder whether Abshire really will suffer any consequences other than his own sense of his tarnished honor.



Despite his obvious disillusionment with the American political system and its agencies, Burke appears to put forth no better alternative to replace the current arrangement. He speaks favorably of the Italian fascists as the "only political regime" to deal successfully with the Mafia, specifically by torturing them, shooting them, and sending them to the front. However, Burke clearly views the fascists negatively overall, describing particularly disliked Internal Affairs officer Nate Baxter as someone who is attempting to disguise his "true fascist mentality." He speaks disdainfully of both liberals and conservatives, and at times "talks like a Marxist." Furthermore, Robicheaux's adversaries in the novel share qualities of intelligence, brutality, and political connectedness that Burke implies go hand in hand. Nonetheless, the U.S. seems to represent the least of the possible evils, because Robicheaux believes in his heart "that justice would be done, things would work out, somebody would show up with the Constitution in his hand."

In fact, Robicheaux, and Burke, seem to take the corrupt nature of politics in general for granted: "Having been raised in Louisiana, I had always thought that politics was the province of moral invalids." Furthermore, when the District Attorney's office seems prepared to drop justifiable weapons charges against Robicheaux because "elections are coming around again" and the district attorney wished to appear tough on "gambling and narcotics," Robicheaux accepts this as typical political behavior. And if political institutions evidence ineptitude at best and outright criminality at worst, it follows that the policies and actions of such institutions will display those same qualities. In *The Neon Rain*, Burke focuses on United States policy in Central America, a timely topic in 1987 when the U. S. government and particularly the Central Intelligence Agency were involved in arms deals, some of them allegedly illegal or quasilegal, with El Salvador, Guatemala, and Nicaragua. Many times, they supported controversial right-wing leaders in order to hinder the expansion of communism in the new world. In Burke's *New Orleans*, these leaders (and other right-wing groups, like the Nicaraguan Contras) receive support through the sale of drugs, aided covertly by government operatives and organized crime.

This anti-communist stance may constitute, for Burke, the worst sin, as those involved sacrifice tangible individuals in favor of abstract ideals. Thus, Robicheaux tells Philip Murphy, one of the intelligence agencytype villains in this plot, "What nails me about your kind is that you're always willing to sacrifice half the earth to save the other half. But you're never standing in the half that gets blitzed."

On the other hand, Robicheaux clearly admires rogue Treasury Agent Sam Fitzpatrick, whose "one-man crusade against an entire government policy in Central America" costs him his life. Specifically, Fitzpatrick objects to the deaths of Catholic nuns and American missionary priests killed "with the M-16s and M-60 machine guns we give them" at the hands of right-wing organizations that viewed progressive Catholics as a threat. Robicheaux recognizes the atrocities but refuses to take personal responsibility for the wrongs, recognizing in practical hard-boiled detective fashion that New Orleans contains more than enough crime to keep him busy.



Techniques

According to Joseph T. "Cap" Shaw, former Black Mask editor and one of the driving forces behind the development of hardboiled crime fiction, "character conflict is the main theme; the ensuing crime, or its threat, is incidental." In *The Neon Rain*, Burke fulfills this edict admirably, even if the numerous crimes take more than an "incidental" role in the novel's plot. Robicheaux conflicts with practically every other character in the novel, including his half-brother, Jimmie, whose criminal associations Robicheaux disapproves; his girlfriend, Annie, who refuses to recognize the legitimate place of violence in Robicheaux's world; his partner, Clete, who ends up on the wrong side of the law and actually working for the team that seeks to discredit Robicheaux; and his boss, Captain Guidry, though on his side, suspends him and warns him against actions which Robicheaux takes anyway. More importantly, the conflict between Robicheaux and Philip Murphy, though physical, transcends a mere cops-and-robbers struggle.

Robicheaux, though he claims to have abandoned his sense of "personal honor," does, in fact, believe "absolutely that it was as dishonorable for a man to allow himself to be used as it was for him to use others," the very offense of which he accuses Murphy.

Another technique previously documented both in Southern literature and detective fiction appears in *The Neon Rain*, that of character doubling, where one or more characters represent mirror images of the protagonist. In Southern literature, this may occur because the South itself seems to have two identities—the genteel, traditional South, and the racist, capitalistic South hiding just beneath the surface. In detective literature, particularly in hard-boiled literature, doubling occurs to underscore the moral complexity of the modern world, in which the actions of hero and villain may differ only in the motives behind their use. Although more than one double of Robicheaux appears in *The Neon Rain*, the most significant seems to be his near-twin half-brother, Jimmie the Gent. Like Robicheaux, Jimmie lives in two worlds, operating a legitimate business but occasionally serving bootleg liquor and associating equally well with legitimate businessmen, politicians, police officers, and known Mafia members. In addition, Didoni Giacano's betrayal of Jimmie, a friend and business associate, closely resembles Clete's betrayal of Robicheaux by his association with Philip Murphy and his team, a group that actually committed crimes for which Robicheaux stands accused and the existence of whom Robicheaux has been unable to prove.



Themes

Alcoholism

When the novel begins, Dave is a recovering alcoholic with four years of sobriety. Despite the fact that his partner is a heavy drinker and his job brings him in contact with alcohol almost on a daily basis, Dave stays strong in his choice to avoid alcohol. Dave remembers when he was drinking heavily and he would wake up in strange places, would pass out in alleys, and would find himself robbed by the criminals he was paid to arrest. It is these memories that help Dave remain alcohol free. However, as Dave begins to investigate the death of a young woman whose body he found in a neighboring parish, bad people begin making threats against his life. A group of these people led by a possible CIA agent even attack Dave in the home of a woman he has recently met, violating his new friend and torturing him while asking questions about a man Dave has never met.

These threats escalate as Dave refuses to stop investigating the murder. One night Dave comes home and finds these men in his houseboat. The men drug Dave and kidnap him, taking him to a strange place where they force him to drink alcohol mixed with drugs. Dave's body instantly remembers alcohol and embraces it. After forcing him to drink the alcohol, these men put Dave in his car and allow it to drive out of a parking garage, falling three stories to the street below. Dave survives the crash with minor injuries, but the alcohol remains in his system. Dave's body continues to crave the alcohol. After Dave is released from the hospital, he leaves Annie alone on his boat to search out more alcohol. Dave spends the night in a bar, drinking, his sobriety forgotten. For several days, Dave loses himself in alcohol, doing stupid things, until he finds himself locked up in the county jail.

Dave is a recovering alcoholic, but soon forgets why sobriety is important when he is forced to drink again. Dave allows alcohol to once again take over his life after one slip that was not of his making. Alcohol causes Dave to do stupid things, such as call the CIA and make threats against the man answering the phone. Dave is eventually arrested, causing him to go without alcohol for a full day. This wakes Dave up to his mistakes and helps him to shake the alcohol once again.

Family

Dave has a half-brother named Jimmy who is a restaurateur and a minor gangster. Dave is protective of his younger brother, even though he does not agree with Jimmy's friends or lifestyle. Jimmy adores his brother as well, using his connections in the mob to help Dave clear his name after the car accident. When Jimmy is shot, Dave becomes convinced that he was shot because he looks like Dave and his enemies mistook Jimmy for him. Dave goes after Murphy in revenge, but soon learns it was not Murphy. In fact, Dave learns that Jimmy's shooting had nothing to do with him, but everything to do with



Jimmy's choice of friends. Jimmy was shot because he was going to testify against Didi Gee.

General Abshire had a son who was lost in Vietnam. Abshire's son became a prisoner of war and was forced to lay mines that led to the My Lai Massacre. Abshire is filled with guilt for his son's actions and feels responsible. As a result, Abshire has allowed himself to be forced into sending weapons to Nicaragua to help the revolution. If not for his son, Abshire would never have become involved in the Nicaragua situation and his involvement would not have led Dave into his trouble with Murphy and his people. If not for Jimmy, Dave never would have confronted Murphy and killed him.

Good Versus Evil

Dave is a good cop. Dave sees himself as one of the only moral people left in the world and attempts to use good moral judgment in his work. Unfortunately, Dave comes up against immoral people everyday in his work who chose to do things without thought to what might be right or wrong. This causes Dave to do things that go against his moral fiber and leave him struggling with his conscience at the end of the day. Dave wants to be right, wants to do the right thing, but his job and the people he runs into makes this impossible.

Julio Segura is a drug dealer who has come to America after suffering in the war in Nicaragua. Segura has embraced the freedom and independence living in America affords him. Segura runs drugs and prostitutes, but manages to do things in such a way that the police cannot prove he is a criminal. As a result, Segura lives his life as though he is above the law. This leads Segura to feel invincible until he comes up against Dave and Cletus. Segura is killed when his bodyguard pulls a gun on Cletus, forcing Dave to fire his weapon in defense of his partner.

Good versus evil is a theme of this novel because it is a classic cops and robbers type of story. Dave is a good cop who struggles with his morals while doing all he can to stop the bad guys. Segura is a classic bad guy, running drugs and prostitutes while still living the American dream without threat of prison. These two worlds clash, causing Dave to cross the line into evil to protect himself and the people he loves, while Segura and his friends cross the line into good in order to protect themselves with the law.

Significant Topics

Like many hard-boiled writers, Burke attempts to describe the world in realistic terms. To do so, Burke must first admit the essential difference between the appearance of the world and its substance, and the consequent difficulty in realistically describing a world that we have difficulty perceiving accurately. Thus, Burke seeks both to depict the real world and the difficulty in knowing, and accepting, this world. For example, the violence and deviance represented by the files assigned to Robicheaux at the beginning of the novel serve Burke as "a microcosm of an aberrant world." This view of the world continues the hard-boiled tradition, but Burke seems unsatisfied with this description, as



if it oversimplifies the world he knows. The importance of dreams in *The Neon Rain* and others of Burke's works demonstrate his belief in a metaphysical level of existence, a belief which Robicheaux shares: "Shakespeare said that all power lies in the world of dreams, and I believe him." When Robicheaux dreams, the characters or the actions of dream have a message for him, and this level of belief foreshadows Robicheaux's interaction in later novels with the dead—including visions of his wife and father, conversations with a Confederate general, and telephone calls from a career criminal.

Throughout *The Neon Rain*, Burke differentiates between another two worlds—the violent world of which his files represent "a microcosm," and "the quiet world of ordinary people" that Philip Murphy invades to find out how much Robicheaux knows about his operation. In essence, Robicheaux finds both worlds at conflict in him. As a cop, he must stand in the gap between these worlds to ensure that they do not meet; his failure to prevent the one world from infecting the other represents to him the greatest possible failure. As Raymond Chandler admonished in his seminal essay on hard-boiled crime fiction, "The Simple Art of Murder": "Down these mean streets a man must go who is not himself mean, who is neither tarnished nor afraid." Robicheaux considers himself tarnished—he regrets his presence in Annie's life as "a representative of a violent and unfathomable world." But the reader sees him as unafraid and faithful to his own "battered set of ethics" and trusts him to abide by these in his attempt to protect the "world of ordinary people" from the aberrations he must deal with as a law enforcement officer.

Robicheaux's goal of preventing the two worlds from meeting, however, appears problematic at best, as Burke destroys the dichotomy by demonstrating that it exists only as an illusion in the minds of those who choose not to recognize reality—all streets, in essence, are "mean streets." What begins as a humorous reference to the difference between television and "big-people land" by Clete Purcel actually illustrates the disparity between the way the world ought to be—where police respect the rights of criminals and obey the law themselves—and the world as it really exists. Here, the line between cops and robbers appears largely blurred, if it remains at all. Justice prevails in the illusory world that Robicheaux fights to protect, but "in the real world we fry paupers in the electric chair and send priests to prison for splashing chicken blood on draft files. It is the nature of ritual. We deal with the problem symbolically." Because of the normal world's basic inability to improve the aberrant one, Robicheaux chooses to "believe in the world that should be, rather than the one that exists."

The nature of ritual and symbol, of course, begs the question of God's role in these two worlds. Burke's answer seems ambiguous at best—Robicheaux attends Catholic mass regularly and believes in a "higher power," but God's role in the novel appears to be more that of mischief maker than that of redeemer or righter of wrongs. Undoubtedly, Robicheaux views humanity as a fallen race, and even accuses Wesley Potts, the proprietor of "Plato's Adult Theater," of "a serious problem with vanity and pride."

He sees some people, like Julio Segura, as truly evil; others, like his half-brother Jimmy, only take part in questionable behavior, somehow without being tainted by it.



Robicheaux does see God as having a design, and he credits God for bringing Annie into his life. He sees retribution and justice as "biblical" concepts, and he prays for God's attention even while admitting having abandoned Him. Yet his service in the early years of the Vietnam Conflict exposed Robicheaux to no American atrocities—only to God's, as when he watched two young soldiers wading in a river taken under by a floating tree. He also relates the story of a family who crashed in a small plane into the lake on which his houseboat rests, as the result of an unexpected headwind over the Gulf. The parents stayed with their three children, though they could have saved themselves, and only the youngest survived.

God, then, seems to serve only as a type of referee to ensure that death and randomness enters everyone's life at times.

Left in a cruel world without protection from either religion or government, Robicheaux exemplifies the only meretricious life possible—a life of individual responsibility for one's own actions. Thus, Robicheaux's alcoholism threatens to lessen him as a man. He longs for "a rundown Decatur or Magazine Street saloon where I didn't have to hold myself accountable for anything." In fact, he has fulfilled his responsibility and seems about to close the file when Starkweather attacks and kidnaps him, bringing him back into the case by engendering a need for an honorable response. Framed for Fitzpatrick's death, suspended from the force, drinking again, and facing the same challenges group that killed Fitzpatrick, Robicheaux remembers his father's statement that "the crawfish should be the symbol of the United States. If you put an eagle on a rail road (sic) track and a train comes along, what's that eagle going to do? He's going to fly, him. But you put a crawfish on that railroad track and what's he going to do? He's going to put up his claws to stop that train, him." Like the crawfish, Robicheaux faces whatever foe requires it of him—regardless of his chance of success.

Tied in with all of this is Burke's exploration of the ways in which the past affects the present. Like other Southern writers, Burke portrays an American South still intimately connected to the past, and even the police station out of which Robicheaux works has its own distinctly Southern past: it used to be a fire station, and before that a cotton warehouse, a slave "auction arena and a cockfighting pit." Although one would think that these changes indicate progress, Burke demonstrates that New Orleans, and the world in general, decays instead: from Bourbon Street, now inhabited primarily by criminals and addicts, to the bayou, where the violence of modern pirates makes "Jean Lafitte's collection of brigands and slavers" seem "romantic figures by comparison."

Because of this dissolution, Robicheaux says, "I don't like the world the way it is, and I miss the pass," and concludes that "knowledge of the future, would drive us insane."

In fact, the novel ends with Robicheaux retreating from New Orleans to the town of New Iberia, where he grew up, to recapture the past he prefers.

Style

Point of View

The novel is told in the first person point of view. Dave Robicheaux, a New Orleans police detective, is the narrative character. Dave tells the story through his point of view, expressing his thoughts and feelings as though he is writing in a journal or diary. There are times in which the authorial voice is heard, disguised as Dave's voice, in which Dave comments on events not as they are happening but with a sort of twenty-twenty hindsight. When Dave relates the shooting of Segura, he expresses his regrets in his actions as well as his opinion on how the episode could have played out differently if he had made other choices.

The point of view of this novel works well because the first person narrative allows the reader a close relationship to the main character, establishing the intimacy that is necessary for the reader to care what might happen to Dave. The novel is character driven, which requires a close relationship between the reader and the main character, which is well established with the first person point of view. The insertion of the authorial voice adds a sense of guilt to the story, allowing the reader to see Dave's regrets as the story unfolds, but can be somewhat distracting from the action.

Setting

The novel is set in New Orleans. New Orleans is a city of culture, combining the cultures of several different ethnicities due to its diverse history. One of these cultures is the Cajun culture. Dave is the son of a Cajun man, making this culture of deep importance to the story because of its connection to Dave. The fact that the story is set in New Orleans is important because of its history not only as a city, but how its history relates directly to Dave. If the story were set in another location, it would have a different impact on the plot because of Dave's personal history. Dave is part Cajun; therefore, he is at home in New Orleans. If Dave were to live elsewhere, he would stand out like a sore thumb.

Language and Meaning

The language of the novel is simple English. The novel includes slang that is related to Dave's profession as a police officer and French phrases, as well as the names of Cajun foods and styles of speech. The dialogue that Dave remembers hearing from his father is grammatically incorrect when related in English, giving the reader some pause, but keeping the words in their proper order adds a touch of Cajun flare the reader might miss if the words were presented in a more grammatically correct form.

The language of this novel works because it offers both the simple English of the prose that allows readers of all ages to understand it, but also offers phrases in French that



are common to Dave's culture. When Dave speaks to his brother in the hospital, Jimmy tells Dave that he loves him in French. This is important because this is the language of their childhood; therefore, the expression would mean more to Dave in French than in English. The phrases Dave relates from his father are grammatically incorrect. This works because it allows the reader to embrace Dave's father's language as he understood it with the Cajun intonations that were common in his own expressions.

Structure

The novel is divided into twelve chapters and an epilogue. Each chapter is fairly long, most between twenty and forty pages. The epilogue is only a few pages long, wrapping up the plot and explaining what happened to Dave after the climax of the plot. The novel is told completely from Dave's point of view, often expressed in exposition or internal monologues that include dialogue between Dave and supporting characters.

The novel has one main plot and two subplots. The main plot revolves around Dave's investigation into the death of a young black woman that causes Dave to stumble onto the investigation into weapons being sent to Nicaragua. This investigation involves a General and a CIA agent, people who find themselves in a position where they must stop Dave from continuing his own investigation. One of the subplots involves the young woman who Dave meets while stranded on a road in a remote parish. The other subplot involves Dave's brother and his involvement with a New Orleans mobster.

Quotes

"The anti-capitol-punishment crowd—priests, nuns in lay clothes, kids from LSU with burning candles cupped in their hands—were praying outside the fence. But another group was there too—a strange combination of frat boys and rednecks—drinking beer from Styrofoam coolers filled with cracked ice; they were singing 'Glow, Little Glow Worm,' and holding signs that read This Bud for you, Massina and Johnny, start your own Sizzler franchise today." Chapter 1, pg. 1

"It was the south Louisiana I had grown up in, around New Iberia. Oak, cypress, and willow trees lines the two-lane road; the mist still clung like torn cotton to the half-submerged dead tree trunks back in the marsh; the canebrakes were thick and green, shining in the light, and the lily pads clustered along the bayou's banks were bursting with flowers, audibly popping, their leaves covered with drops of quicksilver." Chapter 2, pg. 23

"This part of New Orleans never seemed to change, and somehow its confirmation of yesterday on a rainy summer night always dissipated my own fears about time and mortality. And it was this reverie that made me careless, let me ignore the car that parked behind me, and let me walk her sidewalk with the vain presumption that only people like Julio Segura had things happen to them out of sequence." Chapter 2, pg. 43

"The accent was Deep South, genuine peckerwood, and on his right arm was a tattoo of a grinning skull in a green beret with crossed bayonets under the jaw and the inscription kill them all...let God sort them out." Chapter 3, pgs. 44-45

"But, as Fitzpatrick had said, I'd written my own script, and the next morning, I continued to write it, only with some disastrous consequences that made me wonder if my alcoholic, self-destructive incubus was not alive and well." Chapter 4, pgs. 71-72

"Then my trio of friends squeezed the remaining air out of my chest, the blood out of my heart, the light from my eyes." Chapter 5, pg. 94

"I hope he didn't suffer. The inside of the car was a firestorm. I couldn't see anything except flames swirling inside the gutted windows. But in my mind's eye I saw a papier-maché figure, with freckles painted on his face, lying quietly between the roaring yellow walls of a furnace, ridging and popping apart in the heat." Chapter 6, pg. 105

"I had never felt more alone, and I uttered a prayer that seemed a contradiction of everything I had learned back at the Catholic school: Dear God, my higher power, even though I've abandoned You, don't abandon me." Chapter 7, pg. 131

"Presents come in strange packages. Don't question the fates." Chapter 9, pg. 157

"A navy destroyer broke the spine of their ship with depth charges in 1942. But I believed that the evil they represented was held in check by the family who sacrificed their lives so their youngest member could live." Chapter 10, pg. 182

"But scared money never wins. You don't ease up on the batter in the ninth, you don't give up the rail on the far turn." Chapter 11, pg. 214

"'It gonna rain frogs by tonight,' she said. 'First it get hot and windy, then it smell like fish, then lightening gonna jump all over my little house.'" Chapter 12, pg. 245

Key Questions

Southern literature highlights the tension between past and present as well as between appearance and reality. Hardboiled literature generally emphasizes the latter as well, debunking the idea that any order exists in the world other than what humanity creates and enforces. These tensions appear in *The Neon Rain* in what Burke seems to see as the essential conflict between the need to act honorably and to accept responsibility for actions versus the equally important need to let go of those things beyond individual control in order to cope with a random world. Robicheaux thus seems driven to mete out justice to combat the arbitrary manner with which people otherwise seem to meet their fates, but retreats in the end to the rural parish in which he grew up, finding, at least temporarily, redemption in his own past.

1. Southern literature often describes the antebellum South romantically; Burke seems to describe the pre-civil rights South in much the same way. Given that Burke has spoken strong words against racism elsewhere, how can the reader account for this attitude towards the South of the past?

2. Burke juxtaposes religion, or religious figures, with violence in several scenes.

For instance, priests and nuns oppose Massina's execution, while "frat boys and rednecks" celebrate it; Annie Ballard's "mother was a Mennonite peace worker and her father a descendant of John Brown's people." Why does Burke connect these concepts in the novel?

3. Discuss the novel as belonging to the hard-boiled school of literature. In what ways does Burke carry on the hardboiled tradition? In what ways does he depart from it?

4. Discuss the novel as an example of Southern literature. Beyond the obvious fact that the novel takes place in Louisiana and Mississippi, why does the novel appear to belong to this body of literature? In what ways does the novel differ from "typical" Southern literature?

5. One critic has argued that without the character of Cletus Purcel, the Robicheaux novel *Dixie City Jam* would not contain enough violence to fulfill the requirements of the hard-boiled genre. What about *The Neon Rain*? Does Robicheaux himself solve problems in the typical fashion of a hard-boiled detective?

6. James Lee Burke has stated that he believes that racism constitutes perhaps the greatest evil facing American society today. Burke certainly represents a number of different races, ethnic groups and nationalities in *The Neon Rain*, but does he make any overarching statements about race or racism in general?



7. At one point in the novel, Robicheaux states his suspicion "that John Calvin was much more the inventor of our Southern homeland than Sir Walter Scott." How do Calvin's ideas of humanity's iniquity appear in *The Neon Rain*? Is there something about the way in which Burke uses this idea that adds to the "southern-ness" of the novel?



Topics for Discussion

Why does Dave go to visit Johnny Massina? Who is Johnny Massina to Dave? What has Johnny Massina done to cause his execution? Did Johnny commit the crime of which he was convicted? What does Johnny tell Dave? Does it turn out to be true? Why does Johnny tell Dave this story?

Who is Jimmy the Gent? What is his relationship to Dave? Is the story Johnny Massina tells Dave about Jimmy true? Is Jimmy a friend of Didi Gee's? What prove is there of their relationship? Use quotes to defend your answer. Who shoots Jimmy? Why? What does Dave do about it?

Who is Didi Gee? What relationship does Dave have with Didi Gee? Why does Dave not trust Didi? How does Didi Gee help Dave? Is Didi Gee really helping Dave? Why does Didi Gee tell Dave where Murphy can be found? Is this to help Dave or to help Didi Gee? Why does Dave attack Didi Dave? Does Didi Gee get the punishment he deserves?

Who is the girl Dave finds in the lake? Why does Dave want to know about her autopsy? Why is no autopsy done on the girl? Why does the local sheriff not like Dave's involvement in the case? Why does the local sheriff send two deputies to harass Dave? Who is behind the murder of this girl? Why was she killed? What did the girl know?

Why does Murphy and his friends force Dave to drink alcohol? What do they hope will happen if Dave drinks? Why do they put Dave behind the wheel of his car? What do they think people will think if Dave dies? What do people think? Why does this episode cause Dave to drink again? Why does Dave allow this episode to make him drink again?

Who is Annie? How does Dave meet Annie? Why does Dave give Annie credit for saving his life twice? How did Annie save his life? Why does Annie continue to see Dave? Why does Annie not run away from Dave after the three men attack them in her house? Why does Annie think Dave has been kidnapped when she wakes in his boat to find him gone? Why does Annie bail Dave out of jail? Why does Annie go to New Iberia with Dave?

Why is Dave suspended from his job? What do they think Dave did? Why is Dave arrested? What is Dave charged with? Is the charge fair? Why does this arrest stop Dave from drinking anymore? Does Dave deserve to get his job back? Is Dave a good cop? Why does Dave resign from the New Orleans police department? Should Dave have kept his job?

Literary Precedents

Burke's *The Neon Rain* shares elements of both Southern and detective traditions.

Edgar Allen Poe, a southerner, invented the detective story with "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" (1841), although other detective fiction like Mark Twain's *Pudd'nhead Wilson* (1899) and several works by William Faulkner including *Intruder in the Dust* (1948) seem more distinctly Southern. Any novel set in Louisiana begs comparison to Robert Perm Warren's *All the King's Men* (1946), but in this case the comparison seems justified. Both authors investigate, among other things, the extent to which ends justify means and the value of individual relationships in a corrupt world. Burke virtually begs such comparison with his frequent mention of Huey Long and various structures named for him, as Warren based his novel on that Louisiana governor's career.

In fact, numerous critics have noted Warren's interest in, and use of, hard-boiled technique.

Of course, *The Neon Rain* specifically follows in the wake of such hardboiled novels as Dashiell Hammett's *The Maltese Falcon* (1930), Raymond Chandler's *The Big Sleep* (1939), Mickey Spillane's *I, the Jury* (1947), Ross MacDonald's *The Moving Target* (1949), and Robert B. Parker's *The Godwulf Manuscript* (1973). Robicheaux's alcoholism and recovery resemble the extremely hard-boiled Matt Scudder's in Lawrence Sanders' *The Sins of the Fathers* (1976). Burke's interest in the nature of evil, his use of doubling, and his occasional foray into environmentalism all continue the tradition of John D. MacDonald's hard-boiled adventure novels featuring fellow houseboat-dweller Travis McGee, such as *The Deep Blue Good-By* (1964).

Related Titles

The series which James Lee Burke began with *The Neon Rain* has become one of the most popular detective series in recent years.

Robicheaux marries Annie, and they adopt a young girl from a plane crash in *Heaven's Prisoners* (1988). Burke continues the theme of doubling in this novel, and Robicheaux acknowledges his similarities to the boyhood-friend-turned-criminal, Bubba Rocque.

Black Cherry Blues (1989) furthers Robicheaux's investigation of the past and its affect on the present, and returns Cletus Purcel to the series, now working for the Mafia. Burke explores doubling in a new dimension in *A Morning for Flamingos* (1989), in which Jimmie Lee Boggs (whose name could not be much closer to James Lee Burke) shoots Robicheaux, who then goes undercover to capture fellow Vietnam veteran and family man Tony Cardo. In *A Stained White Radiance* (1992), Burke adds incest to the list of familiar Southern themes included in the series, and further develops the appreciation of the natural Louisiana bayou which he expresses in his other novels. The sixth Robicheaux novel, *In the Electric Mist with Confederate Dead* (1993), Burke seems intentionally to distance himself somewhat from the Southern tradition, allowing the ghost of a Confederate general to renounce Robicheaux for dishonorable behavior. In *Dixie City Jam* (1994), Burke more directly explores the problem of race relations in the south, as Robicheaux focuses on the search for a World War II Nazi submarine sunk in the Gulf of Mexico. Once again the dead communicate directly with the living in *Burning Angel* (1995), perhaps the most surrealistic novel of the series and one that most strongly emphasizes the impact that the past has on the present. Burke returns to race and doubling in *Cadillac Jukebox* (1996), as Robicheaux realizes he shares some of the attitudes of the racist accused of the murder of a prominent civil rights leader thirty years earlier. Burke's *Sunset Limited* (1998) jumps from past to present to past again in such a way as to connect the two as strongly as in *Burning Angel*, although in a very different manner. *Purple Cane Road* (2000) sees state politics, race, the past, and doubling interconnected in such a way as to erase any remaining doubt that Burke's work continues the traditions of the best Southern writing.



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