

On Beauty Study Guide

On Beauty by Zadie Smith

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Plot Summary

The following version of this book was used to create this guide: Smith, Zadie. *On Beauty*. New York: Penguin, 2005.

The novel, told from the third-person omniscient point of view, opens with an e-mail exchange between Jerome Belsey and Howard Belsey. Jerome is staying with the Kipps family in London during a semester abroad. He briefly becomes engaged to Victoria Kipps, and the rest of the Belsey family, who lives in Wellington react differently. Howard is the most enraged, as he is an academic rival to the patriarch of the Kipps family, Monty. Howard flies to London to put an end to the engagement.

Nine months later, it is summertime and Kiki is dealing with the aftermath of finding out Howard has had an affair. She takes a sulky Jerome to the Wellington town fair, where Kiki tries to flirt with a Haitian jewelry seller. She and Jerome run into Claire and Warren, old family friends who have just now gotten married.

In an attempt to act as a family, the Belseys go see a performance of Mozart's *Requiem* in Boston. There, they meet a young black man from Roxbury, Carl. Levi, especially, is excited, as he dislikes living in such a heavily-white area.

The Kipps family moves to Wellington, as Monty is to be a guest lecturer at the college. The Belseys have an anniversary party, with many people from Wellington in attendance. Kiki sees Howard and Claire talking, and immediately realizes that Claire was the woman Howard had an affair with, only heightening her sense of betrayal.

In Part 2, Zora wrestles with her physical appearance. She runs into Carl again at the Wellington pool and her feelings for him begin to develop. Howard prepares for the new school year, and is shocked to see Victoria in his class. Zora manipulates Jack French, the Dean of Humanities, so she can be accepted into Claire's exclusive poetry class. Kiki attempts to kindle a friendship with Carlene Kipps, and though they disagree about many things, Kiki feels they have a special connection. Levi quits his weekend job at a music store after his boss fails to honor Levi's attempt at collective bargaining. He runs into a group of Haitian bootleggers and begins hanging out with them.

At home, Kiki and Howard are barely speaking and are hardly ever in the same room together. They have an explosive fight in which Howard is too cold and Kiki is too irrational. Their argument exposes resentment about Kiki's body, her blackness, and Howard's academic life.

One night, Claire takes her poetry class to a local club called The Bus Stop. Levi and his new group of friends perform a poem that slams the Haitian government. Carl performs, too, and is clearly gifted. After his performance, Claire asks him to join her class and he agrees.



After Thanksgiving, Victoria invites Howard to attend a formal dinner with her and he agrees. Meanwhile, Wellington politics are heating up for a big upcoming faculty meeting in which Howard and Monty will square off, and Claire will be defending “discretionary” students in her classes, such as Carl.

Just before Christmas, Kiki and Carlene go shopping in Boston. Carlene tries to entice Kiki to have a spontaneous weekend at the Kipps vacation home in Amherst. After refusing at first, Kiki agrees -- but Carlene’s family suddenly appears at the train station and takes her away.

In Part 3, both the Kipps and Belsey families are in London for Carlene’s funeral. Her illness turned out to be an aggressive cancer that she never told her family about. The Kipps family finds a note that leaves Carlene’s painting of Maitresse Erzulie to Kiki, but keeps this from her. At the funeral, Kiki is distressed. Howard feels ill and leaves the funeral preemptively. He ends up at his father’s home, and they are only able to talk briefly before arguing. Howard leaves and gets drunk at a pub before showing up to the wake. He finds Victoria in her room, and she is also drunk. Though Howard refuses at first, they eventually have sex.

Back in Wellington, the faculty meeting takes place. Howard gives his speech saying that Monty’s lectures should be made available beforehand so that Wellington can determine if they are appropriate and non-discriminatory. Monty’s rebuttal is much more polished, and he is the clear victor of the debate. The faculty agrees to let Monty proceed with his lectures. After this, Zora gives a speech in place of Claire, that successfully delays the vote on discretionary students.

That night, Howard escorts Victoria to the college formal. He is forced to leave, though, when a glee club gives a performance and he cannot hold in his laughter. Meanwhile, Levi is becoming increasingly involved with the plight of the Haitian workers in Wellington. His interest in street culture transforms from aesthetic to political. He becomes especially close to a worker named Choo, who he visits in Roxbury.

Zora becomes increasingly invested in Carl. She petitions Claire so ardently that Claire works out an arrangement for Carl to get a job in the Black Studies Department’s library. Carl loves his new job and feels proud to work for Wellington. Levi, however, is critical of this change. Zora’s feelings for Carl become evident as she frequently visits him at his new job and informs him of the progress on his case. Howard continues his affair with Victoria by meeting her at a hotel, but flees before they consummate. The next day, Victoria comes to his office and officially ends things between them. Back at home, he and Kiki have sex for the first time in months. When they finish, Kiki seems determined to end their relationship, but Howard begs for more time.

During spring break, Zora and Jerome attend a college party together. Carl and Victoria are also in attendance. Jerome walks in on Carl and Victoria having sex in the coat room. This leads to Zora dragging Carl onto the lawn and confronting him. A major fight ensues in which Zora tells Carl he does not belong at Wellington. In retaliation, Carl claims Wellington is a place of deceit. Though Victoria protests, Carl insinuates at

Howard and Victoria's relationship, and reveals Monty has been sleeping with Chantelle, a girl from Roxbury who is also in Claire's class.

The next day, Zora is called into Wellington because the painting of Maitresse Erzulie has been stolen out of Monty's office, and Carl is a suspect. Meanwhile, Kiki finds the painting under Levi's bed. She confronts him, but Jerome finds a note card attached to the frame in which Carlene bequeaths the painting to Kiki. At the same time, Zora and Howard return to the house, and Zora confronts Howard about his affair with Victoria.

In the final chapter of the novel, Kiki and Howard are officially separated. Kiki has moved out of the house, and while everyone misses her presence, everyone is at peace now that the turmoil of their relationship has settled. Howard, too, is much more relaxed. He goes to Wellington to give a presentation that will determine whether or not he receives tenure. He sees Kiki smiling at him from the audience.

1. Kipps and Belsey, Chapter 1-4

Summary

The novel, told in the third-person, begins with an exchange of e-mails between Howard Belsey and his son, Jerome Belsey. Jerome begins with a long and detailed letter to his father about how much he is enjoying his time abroad in England, and how much he is enjoying staying with the Kipps family, particularly the patriarch of the family, Monty Kipps. Jerome gushes about the Kipps family home and the Kipps children, Michael and Victoria. In Jerome's second e-mail, he acknowledges his father's failure to respond in-depth, but still goes on just as excitedly about the Kipps family. In Jerome's third e-mail, he proclaims that he and Victoria Kipps are in love after just a week and will be married.

Chapter 2 begins with a hectic morning at the Belsey family home. Howard, who is English, and his American wife Kiki Simmonds are preparing breakfast and readying their teenaged children, Zora and Levi, for the day. Howard has just received word of Jerome's engagement and has printed out the e-mail for Kiki to read. She is surprised, but does not spend much time thinking about it. Instead, she is focused on how Levi and Zora will get to school in the snow. Howard is frustrated that Kiki is not reacting in a more shocked, aggressive way. When the children finally depart for school, Howard and Kiki bicker over the contents of the e-mail.

Chapter 3 starts off with a lush description of the Belsey family home, which is a "garnet-colored building in the New England style" (16). Kiki inherited the family through her ancestors, who were slaves and maids for wealthy New Englanders. Whereas Kiki's family is revered, Howard does not get along with his family, as they are "petty, cheap and cruel" (18).

Howard is about to depart for a business trip and decides to leave a day earlier so he can check on Jerome. He phones his friend and colleague Dr. Erskine Jegede, who he typically has lunch with on that day, and tells him of his travel plans. He tries to get Erskine to sympathize with him about how terrible Monty Kipps is. Through their conversation, it is revealed that Monty has recently published a highly successful book on Rembrandt, and Howard has been trying to write a book on the same topic for years.

Before Howard leaves for his flight, he and Levi briefly talk. Levi jokes that he is glad Jerome found someone and that he will no longer be a virgin. Howard tries to make Levi understand why being in-laws with Monty is terrible, but Levi does not understand his father's perspective. Soon after Howard leaves for his flight, Kiki looks through Howard's e-mail. He finds an unread e-mail from Jerome saying that the engagement is "completely over" (26). Howard does not have a cell phone, though, so Kiki cannot reach him.

In Chapter 4, Howard arrives in London, where he was born and raised. He has a rough idea of where the Kipps family lives, but gets lost and calls the Kipps residence. The

son, Michael, reluctantly agrees to meet Howard and lead him to the Kipps home. When they talk, it becomes evident that Michael does not want the marriage to go forth just as much as Howard does. When they arrive at the Kipps home, Jerome and Victoria are speaking with Mrs. Kipps and are both clearly very upset. When Howard arrives, Mrs. Kipps calmly addresses him and says it is best if he leaves with Jerome. She compliments Jerome, and says it is best if Howard does not speak with Monty about this matter.

Analysis

Jerome's e-mails to his dad are long in length and densely packed with information. From his first letter, we come to understand that Jerome is staying with Monty Kipps and his family, and that this is highly upsetting to Jerome's father, Howard, who seems to dislike the Kipps family. Jerome understands this, though, and pokes fun at his father's dislike: "Ah, the [Kipps] family. You didn't respond, so I'm imagining your reaction (not too hard to imagine...)" (3).

Evidently, Howard's dislike of the Kipps family is so strong that he will not even respond to Jerome's e-mails for as long as he is staying with them. Jerome is not too saddened by this, though, and uses his newfound Christianity as a means of forgiving everyone involved. His e-mails hint at the fact that no one else in his family is a Christian and that it is even frowned upon to be practicing so openly. This sets the stage for the overall outlook of the Belsey family and their role in society. Though they live in liberal New England, in a college town no less, it is ironic that the members of the family pass so many judgements on each other, such as Howard's judgement of Jerome's Christianity, or his judgement of Levi wearing a do-rag in Chapter 3.

In Chapter 2, Howard and Kiki bicker lightly. When the children are gone, this bickering heightens to more straightforward insults. Howard is enraged about the news of Jerome's engagement to Victoria Kipps, and Kiki is frustrated with Howard's extreme reaction. There is a sense of exhaustion, as though this is a typical situation. When Kiki snaps at her husband, the narrator notes, "It was an offer to kick open a door in the mansion of their marriage leading to an antechamber of misery" (15). This metaphor tells the reader that their marriage has been a long, carefully constructed union -- but that it also has its secret rooms filled with bitterness and spite.

Chapter 3 parallels this quote almost directly by describing the literal, physical structure of the New England home where the Belsey family resides. The narrator describes the variety of framed photos that hang along the stairwell. This is the first time the reader encounters the theme of "the image," that will be critical throughout the book. The concept of an image -- a frozen moment in time, or an idea captured in a painting -- is critical to the state of the Belsey family, who are reckoning with their ideas of the past, their present selves, and in Howard's case, his work as a professor of aesthetics.

Through Howard's conversation with Erskine in Chapter 3, we learn that both Howard and Monty are noted scholars on Rembrandt. Monty, however, has published a highly



successful book and Howard has yet to even finish his. There is irony here in the sense that Howard is highly possessive of his work and his theories. Though many people feel that art is “open to interpretation,” Howard is very cut and dry when it comes to his ideas of right and wrong. This attitude foreshadows how he may come to deal with other issues in his personal life.

When Howard goes to London to find Jerome, he is confronted with both Michael Kipps and Mrs. Kipps. Despite his strong attitudes towards the family, and the sharp, cutting words he spoke to Erskine only hours before, Howard is bumbling before the Kipps family. His sentences are short, and cut off--he is hardly capable for forming a complete thought. This reflects on Howard's intimidation, as well as to his failure to fully consider situations from any perspective but his own.

Discussion Question 1

Howard Belsey clearly dislikes Monty Kipps. How does the rest of the family seem to feel about him?

Discussion Question 2

Do you think Jerome and Victoria are actually in love?

Discussion Question 3

How would you characterize Howard and Kiki's marriage?

Vocabulary

bucolic, metaphysics, dissertation, facetious, poignant, myopic, harlequin, varicolored, podgy, proprietorial, grandeur, ennobled, hovel, shunted, scurrilous, carrel, gnomically

1. Kipps and Belsey, Chapter 5-7

Summary

Chapter 5 jumps nine months forward, to Wellington in August. Kiki returns home from a yoga class, and only Jerome is home. He is sulking in his room, writing in a diary. Upon seeing his sadness, Kiki reflects on the past year, and it is revealed that Howard has had an affair with another woman, and that Kiki chose to stay with him. Kiki tries to convince Jerome to come to the annual outdoor festival and after protesting, he decides to go.

At the festival, Kiki tries to make conversation with a Haitian man selling jewelry. He does not seem interested in flirting with her, despite Kiki's efforts. Jerome goes to get food, and Kiki runs into Claire Malcolm and Warren Crane. Claire is a noted poetry professor at Wellington, where Howard teaches, and Warren is a scientist. They have just returned from Europe, where they eloped. Kiki notes how happy they are, but that it also appears part of a performance. Claire and Warren seem eager to get away and depart. As they say goodbye, Claire reveals that Monty Kipps will be a lecturer at Wellington in the fall. Jerome, who has returned, is distraught over the news. Jerome and Kiki head for home, and Jerome says he is considering leaving the country. Kiki says they must appear civilized and polite, even to the Kipps family.

In Chapter 6, the family goes to Boston to see an outdoor performance of Mozart's Requiem. The trip, suggested by Jerome, is meant to resolve the fight that ensued after Howard learned of Monty Kipps's new position at Wellington. At the concert, they run into Erskine and Jack French, the Dean of the Humanities Department. Zora is very eager to impress him and babbles. After the concert, a young man named Carl notices that his CD player has been switched with Zora's. He runs to catch up to her, and though Zora has no interest in speaking with him, Levi does. Carl and Levi talk, and Carl says he is a "street poet." Levi, who is interested in inner-city black culture, is eager to befriend Carl and invites him to his parents' anniversary party.

Analysis

This section jumps nine months into the future, and much has happened within the Belsey family. Kiki lazily thinks about the fact that Howard has had an affair, and that she has genuinely forgiven him. Nevertheless, she seems exhausted--both from the emotional impact of the affair, in addition to the process of overthinking it.

Jerome is still brooding over his broken engagement to Victoria Kipps. Not only that, but Jerome misses the Kipps family as a whole. As the narrator notes, "Jerome had fallen in love with a family" (44). The Kipps family is, in many ways, the polar opposite of the Belseys. Jerome's passion for the Kippses serves as a testament to the struggles that have been rattling the Belsey family for the past few months. Jerome tells Kiki, "A family



doesn't work any more when everyone in it is more miserable than they would be if they were alone. You know?" (60).

Upon seeing Jerome's frustration, Kiki, "felt grateful she was not an intellectual" (43). This is a sentiment Kiki repeatedly tells herself, and it carries many complicated notions. On one hand, she is thankful that she does not have the capacity to linger on a subject for months and months, as Jerome is doing. On the other hand, in stripping herself of the possibility of being an intellectual, there is a hint that Kiki thinks herself lesser than her highly intelligent husband and children. Perhaps because of this, part of her feels that she must forgive Howard because he is, in a way, superior to her.

When Kiki and Jerome are at the town fair, Kiki attempts to flirt with the Haitian man selling jewelry. This introduces the theme of Kiki's sexuality and body image. In this section, she has a desperate urge to be noticed by the people around her, and feels highly aware of her own body at all times. She notices the way that other couples interact, and compares herself to them: "Wellington couples had a talent for looking happy" (52) and "Each couple is its own vaudeville act" (56). Howard's affair has lead Kiki to more deeply consider her own body and the appearances of others.

Discussion Question 1

Do Warren and Claire seem like a "vaudeville act"?

Discussion Question 2

Why is Kiki's interaction with the Haitian man so tense?

Discussion Question 3

What is your impression of Carl? How does the Belsey family react to this new character?

Vocabulary

chamois, morosely, maladroit, ardor, beseechingly, beneficence, pulvinate, brazen, anathema

1. Kipps and Belsey, Chapter 8-12

Summary

It is the Saturday of the Belseys' anniversary party. Everyone is scrambling to prepare except for Jerome, who is working his Saturday job at a record store in Boston. On his way home from work, Levi is walking up Redwood Avenue and notices a "crazy" looking black woman sitting on the porch of a house, staring at him. Levi thinks she must find him suspicious, but she calls out after him. She is convinced that she knows Levi's brother, and then asks after his mother. Levi describes his mother as "bored," and mentions the party taking place later that evening.

In Chapter 9, Levi returns home to find Zora outside decorating. A passerby thinks Levi is attempting to rob the home before Zora shoos them away. Carl sends Levi a message saying he might drop by the party. Inside, Levi tells his parents about the woman he saw and Kiki deduces that this must be the Kipps family. Kiki says she will go over and invite them, and Howard protests.

In Chapter 10, Kiki meets Carlene Kipps, Monty's wife, and the woman Levi had spoken to. She is older than Kiki, in her sixties, and seems to be in bad health. Still, Carlene is thrilled to meet Kiki and they converse for a while on the topics of marriage and motherhood. They appreciate the fact that neither of them are "intellectuals." Kiki invites the family to the party and Carlene agrees to come.

In Chapter 11, when Kiki returns to the party, the first guests have arrived: Christian von Klepper and his girlfriend, Meredith. Kiki dislikes Christian and avoids the conversation and continues readying for the party. Yet, when Howard goes to answer the door, Christian and Meredith present Kiki with a beautiful anniversary gift: an embroidered Shakespeare poem with flower petals pressed in a frame. Kiki wants to show Howard the gift, but people begin arriving in droves.

Chapter 12 opens with Howard answering the door to find Carl. Howard does not remember him and does not seem convinced that he is Levi's friend, and so he turns Carl away. Howard returns to being a fun host without another thought. Howard gives a speech to the crowd and wonders how it went. He ponders a host of other things: such as the fact that he lied to Kiki about his affair. He told her it was a one-night stand with a stranger, but it was something longer.

Zora answers the door for the Kipps family, who are all present except for Carlene. Monty immediately becomes the life of the party and everyone wants to talk with him, including Claire Malcolm. She finds Howard and asks for a segue into Monty's conversation. During their closeness, it is revealed that Claire was the person Howard had an affair with, and that it lasted for three months. Kiki observes their closeness, and Howard realizes she has determined the truth. When Claire goes off to see Monty, Kiki

threatens Howard not to come near her. Howard, traumatized, wanders away and ends up sorting through the music selection with Victoria Kipps.

Analysis

In Chapter 8, Levi returns home from work and considers his love of rap music. For Levi, rap music is an escape from the overly-white world in which he lives. There is some irony in Levi's passion for the city and its inhabitants, though -- for he has a large, comfortable home to return to, and an education from a fine private school. Levi's cushy background enables him to enjoy the music in the way he does, and to aspire to the attitudes and lifestyles it represents.

Nevertheless, just because Levi is from a well-to-do family doesn't mean he is free from racial discrimination. When Levi returns home, a neighbor pauses to make sure that he is not breaking and entering. Though the situation does not escalate, it represents a prevalent attitude within the community, and the unspoken prejudices the Belsey family must face. In addition to the neighborhood's own racial biases is Howard's failure to understand blackness. When Levi comes home complaining about the suspicious neighbor, it is noted that Howard "disliked and feared conversations with his children that concerned race, as he suspected this one would" (85). This is a large paradox within Howard's character -- he is a man who has spent his life studying aesthetics and appearances, and yet he cannot fully fathom the nature and implications of the blackness around him. Rather than confronting it and being a part of the conversation, Howard simply chooses to shut these elements out of his life.

Christian von Klepper and his girlfriend, Meredith, give Kiki and Howard an anniversary gift. The embroidered quote is from Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, and reads "Full fathom five thy father lies; Of his bones are coral made, Those are pearls that were his eyes. Nothing of him doth fade, Both doth suffer a sea-change, Into something rich and strange" (101-2). This passage, known as "Ariel's Song," is a symbol of Kiki and Howard's relationship. The lyrics are beautiful, and populated with vivid imagery--but that imagery is being used to describe a dead body, and the song itself is being sung to mislead. This passage represents how Kiki and Howard are using this party to maintain appearances. They are perhaps even trying to mislead each other and themselves into thinking their relationship is going to succeed, when in reality it is literally minutes away from crumbling.

At the end of the section, Howard has a private moment with Victoria Kipps. Kiki has just learned of Howard's affair with Claire, and though Howard is devastated, he quickly falls under Victoria's spell. Their interaction is very close and flirtatious, and seems inappropriate given everything that has just come to light about Howard and Kiki's relationship. This moment serves as a respite for Howard, and may foreshadow a deeper relationship between Howard and Victoria.



Discussion Question 1

Describe how Levi is different from his siblings. How is he similar?

Discussion Question 2

How would you describe the mood surrounding Kiki's conversation with Carlene?

Discussion Question 3

How do you think Kiki was able to understand Howard was having an affair with Claire?

Vocabulary

imperiled, venal, distended, gallingly

2. The Anatomy Lesson, Chapter 1-4

Summary

It is now late September and the hot summer has given way to a cool, damp fall. Zora, eager for the new school year, has a firm self-improvement plan in place. She does not “feel the part,” and so she “dresses it instead” (129). She heads to school early and goes for a swim. While she is in the pool, someone in another lane takes her goggles. It turns out to be Carl, who recognizes her from the Mozart concert. Zora does not want to talk to him at first, but he persists. When their conversation becomes stilted, Zora suddenly wishes he found her interesting.

In Part 2, Chapter 2, Howard is preparing for his first class of the year. He views the occasion as “dispiriting” (141). His assistant, Smith J. Miller, is excited about the first day, though Howard assures him that the majority of the class who will attend the first lecture will not show up to the second class. Howard is further thrown off by the fact that everybody at the college is aware of his affair with Claire. Though people appear to think Kiki has forgiven him, Howard knows their relationship is in dire straits and that Kiki is depressed.

Zora visits Dean Jack French and says that the fact she was not accepted into Claire’s poetry class is a sign that she is being unfairly treated based on the public knowledge of her father’s affair. Jack protests, but Zora is not willing to settle. She subtly threatens bringing the matter up before the advisory board. To this, Jack caves and says he will discuss the matter with Claire. Zora leaves, and Jack runs into Claire soon after. Claire stands by her decision to deny Zora entry into the class because she is simply not a good creative writer. Jack brings up Zora’s threat of the advisory board, and Claire realizes she has no choice and must admit Zora into her class.

In Chapter 4, Kiki purchases a pie and brings it to Carlene Kipps after work. She finds Carlene in the study, attempting to alphabetize Monty’s books -- but she is very exhausted. Kiki is in awe of the painting of Maitresse Erzulie, which depicts a shapely Haitian woman surrounded by bright flowers. Their conversation gets off to a rocky start, and Kiki thinks that their previous report is gone. However, they quickly find common ground talking about their children. Carlene eventually brings up the topic of Howard’s infidelity. This leads to a discussion about Kiki once having relationships with women before she met Howard. Carlene then mentions that Monty’s closest friend is actually a gay man. Kiki finds this absolutely hilarious, and they spend the rest of the afternoon laughing together.

Analysis

The Elaine Scarry quote that begins the section helps set the stage for the forthcoming events: The quote, in part, says “A university is among the precious things that can be

destroyed.” This idea foreshadows the gossip, rivalries, and cultural debates that are soon to populate Wellington.

Chapter 1 opens with Zora Belsey getting ready for school. This is the first time her character has been focused on being alone. Because of this, the reader is able to better understand the insecurities that populate this seemingly confident girl. Though Zora is publicly like her father -- strong, opinionated, and calculating -- this private scene reveals the ways in which Zora is much like her mother, as well. In particular, Zora is struggling with the nature of her physical beauty and feeling comfortable in her own skin. This struggle to accept one’s own physicality is a recurring theme for many characters in the novel.

Before Jack and Claire have their discussion about Zora, Claire shares an old poem of hers. The poem has the same title as the novel itself, “On Beauty.” This poem is very significant, as it reflects many of the larger themes of the novel. Lines like, “of sins they can’t forgive us,” “Speech is beautifully useless,” and “and so their sadness is perfect,” reflect the feelings of self-righteousness, betrayal, and cultural identity confusion that almost every character experiences at some point in the novel. In addition, the form of the poem -- a pantoum -- is an archaic structure with rigid guidelines. This structure represents the university lifestyle in which the Belsey family is embedded -- they live their lives according to arbitrary standards and outdated structures, such as Howard’s yearly academic rituals that Kiki must adhere to, or a white, upper-middle class lifestyle that Levi must adhere to. These structures are also reflected in the scene immediately following: when Jack tells Claire she must admit Zora into her poetry class because that’s “what happens in universities” (161).

In Chapter 4, Kiki calls Jerome for information about the Kipps family. She can tell Jerome has been smoking, but does not criticize him for it, because she has taken up smoking again, too. This habit reveals a similarity between the mother and son: a tendency towards self-destructive habits. Both of them are content to brood, and to keep their feelings inside as opposed to expressing them openly. Kiki recognizes this alliance between the two and thinks, “You don’t have favorites among your children, but you do have allies” (167).

When Kiki goes to see Carlene, she sees the painting of Maitresse Erzulie for the first time. Kiki is in awe of this painting and the beauty of the woman portrayed. This is ironic in the sense that Kiki shares many characteristics with the woman in the painting -- and yet she is presently amidst a crisis of self-image.

Discussion Question 1

Why do you think the author chose to include the Claire Malcolm poem?

Discussion Question 2

Make a prediction about how Kiki and Carlene’s friendship might evolve.



Discussion Question 3

What is your impression of Carl? How do Zora's feelings about him change over the course of their conversation?

Vocabulary

raucously, sclera, blethering, apprised, stymied, impaction, pantoum, envisage, obliquely, felicitously, vertiginous, raucously, mendacious

2. The Anatomy Lesson, Chapter 5-6

Summary

On a Saturday, Levi goes to work at the mega-store in Boston. He thinks about when he first took the job, how much he liked the company ethos of being a family rather than a hierarchy. Yet, Levi has come to realize this is just a ruse. He has received word through the grapevine that Bailey, the store manager, is planning on making people work both Christmas Eve and Christmas Day. When Levi arrives at work, he attempts to organize a meeting with his co-workers. Only a few people show up, and Levi tries to get everyone to organize against Bailey. The conversation does not get very far before Bailey appears and breaks up the meeting. He lets everyone go but Levi, who he harshly reprimands. Levi is so angered, he quits on the spot. He heads out into Boston, where he spots a group of black men selling bootleg DVDs. The men are laughing and joking and Levi is instantly attracted to their chemistry and carefree attitudes.

In Chapter 6, Kiki is sitting on the porch that leads from the kitchen to the garden, staring out into the the yard. Zora enters the kitchen, wanting to make breakfast, and questions her mom sitting out in the cold. Zora's attitude towards Kiki is sharp and brusque. She asks her mom if she wants to go shopping with her, but Kiki says she is going to see Carlene instead. Zora is passive-aggressive, saying it's "fine" if Kiki wants to see her even though Monty is actively preaching against Howard at school. Zora also asks Kiki if it is "cool" that she is taking Claire's class, and Kiki says it is fine. Kiki hears a door slam, and it turns out to be Levi coming home from the night before. Levi says he "met some guys" and "went on to a club" (201). Levi and Zora realize they are both going to the Bus Stop to see a poetry performance on the same night. Just as their conversation is heating up, Howard appears. It is "maybe the first time in a week that Howard and Kiki" have "stood in the same room" (202).

Howard asks the children to leave the room, which they do. Alone, Howard tries to get Kiki to have a conversation about their relationship. Kiki is immediately very defensive, and takes everything Howard says as an opportunity to attack. Howard wants to talk about what will happen "next" in terms of if they will divorce. Kiki continues to deflect and attack. She brings up the fact that she is surrounded by white people and has completely lost touch with her blackness. She sees Howard having an affair with Claire as an attack on both the color of her skin and her womanly figure. Howard comments that Kiki was "slim" when they married, which intensifies the discussion. Howard loses sympathy for Kiki and leaves the house with him slamming the door and Kiki kicking it shut behind him.

Analysis

Levi is dissatisfied because the company he works for initially appeared like a welcoming family environment, but is much different in reality. He reflects on the

application form, which stated, “Our companies are part of a family rather than a hierarchy...In a sense we are a community, with shared ideas, values, interests and goals” (180). Yet, Levi has come to realize that the company does not value these ideals at all. Levi’s discontent with work reflects the same discontent he feels for his family. Among the Belsey family, Levi feels like an outsider. Not only is he the youngest, but is arguably the most in-touch with his blackness. Levi loves rap music and admires the young black men who live in urban areas. Levi feels that, by living in Wellington with this bourgeois family, he is being kept from the more “real” experience he could be having. At the same time, these desires are somewhat ironic. In this section, Levi attempts to organize employee resistance against the tyrannical store manager. Levi is able to do this because he is empowered with the knowledge his academic father provided him regarding “direct action” (181). For Levi, his interests in life on “the streets,” represent a fantasy that is comfortable to him because of his privileged experiences.

In Chapter 6, Zora complains to Kiki about her physical appearance. Kiki thinks this is why she “dreaded having girls,” because “she wouldn’t be able to protect them from self-disgust” (197). Kiki reflects on how, because of societal restrictions, women are incapable of loving themselves. Yet Kiki does not reflect on her own struggles with her self-perception. Kiki seems capable of recognizing beauty in others, but incapable of seeing it in herself. Instead, Kiki only sees how she has failed to protect Zora. In return, Zora shows no sympathy to Kiki, despite all of the children knowing the details of Howard’s affair with Claire. In conversation, Zora eagerly defends Howard when Kiki suggests that Monty’s article in the Herald was not that bad. Zora seems to feel that if Kiki is choosing to remain married to Howard, she must defend him at all costs. Kiki feels “herself a whetstone that Zora was sharpening herself against” (198).

Zora softens slightly when she asks Kiki if it is okay for her to attend Claire’s poetry class. She fumbles and says she would not even be taking the class if graduate schools did not care. There seems to be a sense that the children want Kiki to be angry with Howard. Perhaps they are angry themselves, but do not feel they are entitled to that anger unless Kiki is expressing it. Nevertheless, Kiki seems to have a plan in mind. The oncoming weather tells Kiki, “exactly how long she had left to wait. By next Sunday, winter would be here” (199). This hints at something else, as actual winter is still months away.

During Kiki and Howard’s fight, the author makes note of a painting hanging in the Belsey household. It is an abstract painting whose subject looks like “linen, crumpled up like a rag someone had thrown away” (206). This painting is a metaphor for the marriage that is exploding below it, as it shows something that should be discarded, “caught...in mid-flight,” and frozen in that position with no hope of moving. At the end of the chapter, though, there is movement -- as the painting falls to the floor and breaks, due to the force of Howard slamming the door and Kiki kicking it. This action shows the destructive capacity of Howard and Kiki’s situation, not only to themselves -- but to other precious things around them.



Discussion Question 1

How does Levi perceive his family? How does Levi's family perceive him?

Discussion Question 2

How have the children reacted to the news of Howard's affair?

Discussion Question 3

Describe Kiki and Howard's respective attitudes during their fight.

Vocabulary

supplant, nascent, malapropism, officiousness, puerile

2. The Anatomy Lesson, Chapter 7-11

Summary

It is a rainy Tuesday night and Zora is waiting for her poetry class. She thinks about how she is known for being opinionated, and yet she is not sure if she actually believes in any of these opinions. Her classmates arrive and they make their way to the Bus Stop, a local poetry cafe where they are spending the evening for Claire's class. Claire ends up sitting with Zora and her friends, though she wishes to be sitting with the other, more "poetic," students. Claire and Zora end up having a tense conversation about the intimidating nature of Claire's class. Levi appears with a posse of men, who are going to perform that night.

The first performer is not a very good poet, and goes on for a very long time. The audience is restless for her to finish. While various poets perform, Claire reflects on how Zora is similar to Howard. She thinks about how her relationship has evolved since the affair, and how much she wished it had never happened. She could tell how much Howard desired her, and yet she felt nothing in return -- she simply carried out the affair as a form of self-sabotage. The next act comes to the stage and it is Levi and his group. They rap loudly, in French and in English. Their message is angry and political. When they finish, Zora and Claire go outside and share a cigarette. Claire asks Zora if things are okay between them, and Zora over-enthusiastically insists that yes, they are. One of the classmates bursts outside and says they must return to see the current performance. Back inside, Carl is onstage. His raps are fluid and poetic. The crowd adores him. When he finishes, he is declared the winner of that night's competition. Carl makes his way through the crowd, accepting congratulations. He comes up to Zora and kisses her. Immediately after, Claire intercepts him and asks him to join her poetry class. He accepts.

Chapter 9 takes place just before Thanksgiving. Fate puts Zora, Jerome, and Levi all on the same corner of town at the same time. They go to a cafe together and talk. Jerome is eager to bash Howard and his treatment of Kiki. Neither Zora or Levi readily agree with him. Zora brings up Carl, who Levi says "ain't all that," and that he's "just the kind of rapper white folk get excited about" (238). Zora brings up Victoria Kipps, who she says she really dislikes. Jerome is pained. Levi heads out and goes to meet up with his bootlegger friends in Boston. He admires Felix, their leader. Levi gets paired up with a man named Choo to sell that day. Levi tries to entice him into conversation about "hustling" but Choo is uninterested. He expects Choo to have poor grammar and to enjoy the "game," but he rebuffs Levi repeatedly. At the end of the chapter, he seems to understand that Levi isn't actually from "the streets."

Chapter 10 introduces the perspective of Katie Armstrong, a freshman in Howard's class. Though she is highly intelligent, she is too intimidated to speak up in class. Only a few people speak, including Victoria, a boy named Mike, and Zora, who Katie hates. After class, Katie tries to speak with him and falters. Howard watches Victoria go,



admiring her body. Outside, Victoria catches up with him and asks if he will attend the dinner party for her college society. He agrees.

In Claire's poetry class, Carl is truly transforming, as are many other students. Zora, however, has shown no growth. Carl is genuinely enjoying the class, too, and feels that Claire wants him to succeed. After class, Claire asks Zora to stay. She tells Zora about the upcoming faculty meeting in January, and that instead of going herself, she wants Zora to go and give a "barnstorming speech," about the necessity of including non-students, such as Carl, in the classroom. Zora readily agrees.

During the Christmas recess, Carlene invites Kiki to go shopping with her. They head into Boston and go to the mall. Carlene says that the Kipps family will be going to a country home in Amherst, where there are several Edward Hopper paintings. Kiki says she loves Hopper and would love to see them someday. Carlene spontaneously suggests they head to Amherst that day, but Kiki says no. She returns home and is filled with regret. She rushes off to the station, where she finds Carlene waiting for the train. Just as they are about to depart, the rest of the Kipps family appears--just returning from a shopping trip to New York. Carlene leaves with them, telling Kiki they will take the trip some other time. Kiki is left alone.

Analysis

This section opens with Zora questioning her appearance once again. "In fact, when she was not in company it didn't seem to her that she had a face at all...And yet in college, she was famed for being opinionated, a 'personality'--the truth was she didn't take these public passions home..." (209). Zora, like Kiki and Levi, is attempting to come to terms with their identities and values. Zora is smoking, but relights a new cigarette when she sees her friends approaching, as she is only concerned with how smoking heightens her appearance as a certain kind of person--in her case, an intelligent, sexy intellectual. Zora thinks, "Was anyone ever genuinely attached to anything?" (209), hinting that some of her present conflict might also be rooted in anxiety related to her parents' divorce.

The theme of physical beauty appears in this section, when Claire observes how all of the young women in the class order little to no food, while the young men order whatever they please. Even Claire orders merely a salad, indicating that she, too, is subject to these insecurities. Claire also thinks about her marriage, and expresses genuine regret for the affair with Howard and recognizing she is addicted to "self-sabotage" (223). Her sentiments are genuinely mournful compared to Howard's, which Claire recognizes as she thinks, "Something about his academic life had changed love for him, changed its nature" (225). Claire, a third-party compared to the inner workings of the Belseys, can more clearly see the ways in which Howard and Kiki's marriage has broken down over time. Claire is more objective about Howard's failings, whereas Kiki's expressions of anger are largely based on deep-set resentment that extends far beyond the affair, but is only now being expressed.

When all of the Belsey children meet up just before Thanksgiving, their conversation has them subtly taking sides in their parents' present marriage difficulties. Jerome openly criticizes Howard, saying he has "a problem with gratitude" (237). Zora shrugs off these accusations in Howard's defense. Levi takes no side at all and excuses himself from the conversation. The children taking sides are yet another rift caused by Howard and Kiki's marriage. Once again, though, Levi chooses to rise above these family difficulties in favor of forging a different life for himself.

Some of Levi's own internalized prejudices are revealed as he is working among the Haitian bootleggers. When he meets Choo, he thinks "Such an extended piece of grammatically correct English was not what Levi had been expecting" (244). Levi is attempting to explore his racial identity, but he is also rebelling against the academic culture in which he has been raised.

Chapter 10 momentarily introduces the character of Katie Armstrong. Her character provides an outside perspective of both Howard Belsey and the culture of academia. Her experience coming from "relative poverty and limited education," shows how privileged people are to be coming to Wellington. Her observations of Howard border on reverence, but the reader can see how his in-class persona completely contrasts with his personal life. Furthermore, the developing romantic tensions between Howard and Victoria are completely tangible, even to a third party.

During class, Katie looks at an etching from 1631 called *Seated Nude*. The etching depicts a woman "unadorned, after children and work and age, and experience" (252). This etching seems to represent Kiki, who is a woman struggling with how her body has changed after giving birth, and generally getting older. While Katie is able to see the beauty and the power in this figure, Howard is teaching a lesson on it and treats the subject with cold calculation. This reflects how Claire observed the way academia had changed love for Howard -- he is incapable of recognizing genuine beauty.

These themes of art and beauty continue when Kiki expresses incredible excitement at the thought of seeing an Edward Hopper painting. Hopper is a much more commercial artist than the Old Masters Howard studies, and this shows Kiki's simplistic tastes and lack of pretentiousness when it comes to understanding and appreciating beauty. This is reflected when Carlene says, "I don't care what the doctors say, the eyes and the heart are directly connected" (268). Though Howard attempts to make determinations between the eyes and the heart, Kiki has the two firmly attached.

Kiki aims to draw parallels between herself and Carlene. In spending time with her, she seems to want to better understand her own family and marriage. Carlene provides an example of what it is to be a wife to an academic husband, and perhaps Kiki seeks strength and solace in this. Yet, the end of the section the primary difference between the two is revealed: Carlene is swept away by her family, and Kiki is left alone -- having just planned on running away from the house for a weekend without telling anybody.



Discussion Question 1

How has Claire's character evolved thus far?

Discussion Question 2

Why do you think the author chooses to include the section about Katie Armstrong?

Discussion Question 3

Are there any hints as to what illness Carlene is afflicted by?

Vocabulary

acclimatize, saturnine, doggerel, reification, inviolable, equanimity, coterie, liminality, crenulated, mytheme, assented, oeuvre

3. On Beauty and Being Wrong, Chapter 1-4

Summary

The Belsey family is in London for their Christmas vacation. Rather than spending Christmas at home, they are staying with a Jewish couple whom Howard knows from college. One day, Kiki receives a phone call from Michael Kipps, then announces that Carlene Kipps is dead. An hour earlier, the Kipps family were sitting in their own home in London, discussing Carlene's passing. She died of an "aggressive cancer she had told her family nothing about" (277). Monty points to a note Carlene had written before her death, bequeathing the painting *Maitresse Erzulie* to Kiki. The family is outraged by this note, believing that Kiki "took advantage" of Carlene's illness in order to take this painting. The family agrees to destroy the note, but they will still invite Kiki to the funeral.

Chapter 2 takes place at Carlene's funeral, which is held in a small church in a less affluent neighborhood. The funeral is well attended by people of all ages and races. Erskine and Chantelle, a girl from Claire's poetry class, are both in attendance. Inside, Howard's thoughts begin reeling, and he flees the funeral. After the service, Monty invites Kiki to the cemetery and the wake.

In Chapter 3, Howard is walking through London, taking in the sights of his youth. He is propelled towards his childhood home, where he has not been for four years. A woman he has never met answers the door. Howard says he is looking for Harold Belsey, his father. The woman, Carol, invites him in. Harold is sitting in the living room, watching TV -- a typical posture. Howard notes the pictures of his mother, Joan, around. She has been dead for 46 years. Harold cries at the sight of his son and they hug. Within minutes, though, they are bickering over Harold's nurse. They attempt to have a peaceful conversation, but Howard is angry with his father, and Harold makes many offensive comments about homosexuals and people of color, including Kiki. Howard leaves and finds his way to a pub. He drinks a bottle of wine and then drunkenly makes his way to the wake at the Kipps home. At the Kipps home, he cannot find his wife and children and awkwardly wanders the house in search of a bathroom. Instead, he stumbles upon Victoria in her room. She is also very drunk and flirtatious towards him. Despite Howard's attempt to leave, they end up having quick, unpleasant sex.

Analysis

In this section, it is revealed just how little the Kipps family knows and understands Carlene. After Carlene's sudden death, the Kipps family finds a note bequeathing the *Maitresse Erzulie* painting. They know nothing of her newfound friendship with Kiki, and their first instinct is that Kiki is attempting to rob them. Furthermore, the Kipps family was not even aware that Carlene had a deadly cancer. Carlene represents the life of a

woman who lived solely for her husband and family, and never for herself. If Kiki continues to live as she is, she will be forced to subvert her own needs and end up as Carlene did. This section is thus a crossroads for Kiki, as she will soon be forced to confront a choice between her family and marriage or her own hopes, dreams, and interests.

When Howard visits his father, the reader comes to better understand Howard's difficulties with his own heritage and identity. Howard loathes the deeply British lifestyle and vocabulary his father uses. He finds them to be "so many substitutes for real conversation" (297). Yet, Howard's hatred of British colloquialisms and his frustration with his father's prejudices reveal an ironic turn to Howard's character. Though Howard has spent his life attempting to evolve beyond the ways of his father, Howard has instead simply created a new set of prejudices -- such as his frustration with Jerome's Christianity, or his rule against representational art and music at home. Though Howard flees from his father, he is not actually fleeing from these things he claims to hate, but he is fleeing responsibility and participation in traditional familial love and discussion. Howard thinks he does "not believe, as his father [does], that time is how you spend your love" (302). Yet in the coming chapters, when Howard realizes his transgressions, all he will be able to do is hope for more time with his family.

When Howard has sexual intercourse with Victoria Kipps, Victoria's girlishness and lack of experience is pronounced. The way she speaks and acts mirrors pornography. Despite this, Howard goes through with things, and lets himself get caught up in his drunken desires. Yet, only moments before, he was defending his wife to his father and seeking her out at the wake. Howard's character is split in two in that he thinks a certain way and holds to those beliefs, yet acts completely different than the principles he claims to hold.

Discussion Question 1

What do you make of Chantelle Williams' presence at the funeral?

Discussion Question 2

Do you think Howard is justified in his treatment of his father? How do you view the character of Harold Belsey?

Discussion Question 3

Do you think Victoria Kipps is genuinely interested in Howard, or does she have other motives?

Vocabulary

bedeviled, sartorially, rood, concameration, dolour, aegis, reconnaissance, proselytizers, callow, dictum, pedantic

3. On Beauty and Being Wrong, Chapter 5-8

Summary

It is the day of the faculty meeting, and everyone is restless. Howard anxiously looks around the room and takes in the sight of his colleagues. His debate with Monty is the third item on the agenda, only making Howard more restless. He stretches and sees Monty is just behind him, which makes him all the more nervous. Finally it is Howard's turn to talk. Though he has confidently prepared his argument, he spots Monty in the audience and cannot finish as planned -- he instead reads word for word from his paper. Howard says that Monty will soon be presenting a series of lectures that are political in nature and go against the "liberal" ideals of Wellington. When it is Monty's turn to speak, the audience is clearly on his side. A debate ensues about "free speech" on campus and who it should apply to. Ultimately, the vote at the end of the meeting is in favor of Monty continuing with his lectures and not having to provide copies of them to the rest of the faculty beforehand. Insult is added to injury when, at the end of the meeting, Jack French announces faculty publications and Howard's book on Rembrandt has "no date yet" (332).

After the meeting, Victoria Kipps finds Howard and asks to talk. They go into a back room filled with photocopiers, and Victoria asks if he is still coming to the Emerson College dinner that night. Howard wants all signs of their affair gone and wants Victoria to forget it ever happened. Victoria calls him vain and uses the recent death of her mother as a bargaining chip. Eventually, Howard agrees to the dinner. That evening, all of the Belsey family is getting ready to head out. Zora is going to another college dinner and Howard is offended she did not ask him. When Zora has left, Kiki says that Zora "adores" Howard, but did not want to look like favorites were being played.

At the dinner, Victoria is late. Howard waits around among the serving staff. Victoria arrives and Howard spots her father, too. Howard realizes Victoria may have "other motives," for appearing close to Howard. During the dinner, Howard talks with Erskine in the bathroom. Erskine only has highly sexual things to say about Victoria. While Howard does not engage in this conversation, he realizes "hearing another man speak of Victoria that way had made him want her again" (345).

When Howard returns, a glee club is preparing to perform. Howard has a long-standing phobia of glee clubs, and when they begin performing, he cannot help but start to cry. Eventually, he cannot hold it in and starts laughing hysterically. Howard is causing such a disturbance that he is forced to flee from the room. He returns home and tries to read, but fails. Kiki returns home and she and Howard laugh about the glee club. Despite their moment of affection and nostalgia, Kiki eventually leaves the room so Howard can sleep on the couch.

The next day, Levi wakes up early and heads into Boston with a few cans of food in his backpack. On the train, he reads a book about Haiti he got from the school library and is disturbed by the complex history and present. Eventually, Levi arrives in Roxbury and goes to the address he has on a piece of paper -- Choo's apartment. They have an awkward encounter at first: Choo is not used to guests, and he does not want to accept the food from Levi. Eventually, they bond listening to the album *Fear of a Black Planet* by Public Enemy. Choo then rants about the state of blackness and the state of Haitian people. He says that Monty Kipps is responsible for tricking many Haitian people out of their money, or out of expensive art.

Back in Wellington, Kiki pays a call on the Kipps house. She hopes to sit with Monty and express her condolences over Carlene's passing. Monty seems disheveled and excuses himself for a moment. Before he returns, Chantelle Williams, who Kiki recognizes from the funeral, flees the house in tears. Monty must be off to the college, so Kiki walks with him. Monty shares his views on affirmative action being a detrimental practice. Kiki expresses her opinion, but is also receptive to Monty's ideas.

Analysis

At the faculty meeting, Howard looks around and only has criticisms for his fellow colleagues. It is slowly being revealed over the course of the novel that Howard does not like anyone or anything -- including himself. At no point in the novel thus far has he expressed genuine happiness or content.

Howard's debate against Monty Kipps gives the appearance that Howard wants to protect disenfranchised students from discrimination, and protect the freedom of speech while limiting hate speech. Yet Howard's inability to focus and his wandering thoughts hint that Howard might be rallying against Monty Kipps not out of passion, but out of a desire for control. In this way, Howard and Zora are very alike. Just as Zora has "public passions" that she does not "take home," Howard is railing against Monty seemingly just for the sake of doing so. Zora seemingly recognizes these similarities to her father, and has great admiration for him. Zora is jealous that Howard is going to the college dinner with someone other than her. Howard only criticizes in return.

In his attempts to have control, Howard only creates more chaos. He thinks about how "Victoria Kipps had done a world of good for [his] marriage and for [his] general mental state" (334). Though Howard's liaison with Victoria supposedly allowed Howard to put his marriage in perspective, Howard throws this progress out the window when he agrees to attend the Emerson College dinner with her, thereby perpetuating their relationship for that much longer. Howard cannot deny that being with Victoria, even arguing over petty drama, is "energizing" -- certainly an appealing sensation for a struggling man in his late 50's.

When Kiki kisses Howard on the cheek before heading out for the night, the kiss is felt as "a reference to earlier affection" (341). Later in the section, when Howard tells Kiki about the disaster with the glee club, they laugh together and share a rose-tinted,

nostalgic moment. In these instances, Howard remembers why they fell in love in the first place, and seems to think that their marriage is salvageable. Yet these moments are quickly stymied by Kiki, who withdraws from any deeper affection with Howard. Howard is clearly eager for forgiveness, but Kiki is firmly maintaining the distance between them, not allowing herself to get caught up in nostalgic emotions.

On the train, Levi reads a book about the plight of Haiti. This book, which Levi got from his fancy private school library, is a symbol of Levi's complicated relationship to his heritage. It is noted that Levi is not an avid reader, and the fact that he is so committed to the book reveals that he is deeply dedicated to its contents. Though Levi is not Haitian, he relates to the "othering" of the Haitian people. As Levi feels he is other from his own family, and the Wellington community, Levi sees himself in the Haitians in the book, and his new friends like Choo.

When Levi hangs out with Choo, Choo repeatedly offers him a joint. Levi repeatedly refuses. It has been noted that Levi hates smoking, making him the only member of the Belsey family who has not picked up the habit. Eventually, though, Levi accepts the joint, representing a shift in Levi's character from someone who was attempting to break out of a system, to someone who has simply become complacent within the confines of another system.

When Kiki visits Monty, she sees Chantelle Williams rushing from his house in tears. This is the second time Chantelle has appeared in Monty's presence, under strange circumstances (the first being the funeral). Her appearance potentially hints at something about her relationship to the Kipps family that will later be revealed.

During her conversation with Monty, Kiki says, "All's fair in love and...and academia" (366). This reflects Kiki's attempts to understand Howard's train of thought, and the general ethos of the Wellington community that is so unnatural to her. This quote also touches on the larger theme of academia in the novel, and how it is interwoven with relationships. "Academia" replacing "war" in the traditional quote creates a parallel between the two ideas in which they are both destructive, strategic, and corrupting, yet some see these concepts as "heroic efforts."

Discussion Question 1

Who presented the more convincing argument at the faculty meeting?

Discussion Question 2

Why do you think Howard has so much resentment for his colleagues?

Discussion Question 3

How do you see Kiki and Howard's relationship changing?

Vocabulary

cuckold, sophisms, fillip, lodestars, multivalency, patrician, mawkish, disgorging, larder, perambulate

3. On Beauty and Being Wrong, Chapter 9-10

Summary

Since appointing Zora to give her speech about the advantage of keeping “discretionary” students (such as Carl) at Wellington, Claire has been overwhelmed with correspondence and information from Zora. Claire calls on Erskine to help her with this issue, as she is concerned that next month, discretionaries will be forbidden. Erskine understands and quickly sets up Carl with a job in the Black Studies Department as “Hip-Hop Archivist.” Carl is secretly thrilled about the job, though it is low-paying and part time. He feels proud of his work and comes in on extra days. Zora visits him constantly to let him know how her “campaign” for him is playing out.

At a nearby hotel, Howard waits for Victoria. After the dinner, they have made up and continued their romance. Victoria regularly sends him explicit pictures via e-mail. She arrives at the hotel and they go to the room together. Victoria drops her coat, revealing a full set of lingerie. To their surprise, a cleaning lady appears out of the bathroom. Victoria tries to salvage the mood, but Howard flees.

At Wellington, Levi runs into Carl. Carl is eager to show off his new job, but Levi is unimpressed. Carl invites him to come to the open listening hours, but Levi shrugs him off. He is disgusted that Carl has fallen into “the system.”

Another afternoon, Howard is in his office when Victoria comes bursting in. She is livid that he left her at the hotel and says their relationship is to be immediately terminated. She orders Howard to delete every image she has sent him before fleeing the room. Howard, slightly shaken, leaves his office a bit later -- only to find Kiki sitting in on one of Monty’s lectures.

At home, Howard waits for Kiki, ready to accuse her. When she arrives home, he immediately launches into an argument. Howard is disgusted that she went to one of Monty’s lectures, and Kiki retorts that Howard just likes hating things for the sake of hating them. When the argument cools off, they have a more level discussion about why their marriage worked for as long as it did. This leads to them having sex for the first time in months. After they finish, Kiki feels terrible. Howard insists that they are meant to be together, though Kiki does not feel she can be with him anymore. Eventually, Kiki concedes to give Howard “a little more time” (398).

Analysis

In this section, Zora’s romantic feelings for Carl are increasingly evident. When she visits him, she wears revealing clothing, despite the cold weather. In addition, she is campaigning heavily for him to remain at Wellington. Never before has Zora exhibit this



kind of real, tangible passion for a topic. Zora's romantic interest in Carl is partially drawn from the fact that he has given her a purpose that extends beyond doing well in school. The downside to this is that she seems to expect, in helping Carl, that she will be given a favor in return.

Howard continues his affair with Victoria, despite his plans not to. Victoria has been sending Howard explicit photos of herself, and Howard cannot deny the way in which Victoria makes him feel young. Howard uses Victoria as a means of validating himself when he feels his career and marriage are both failing. When Victoria ends things with Howard, he is relieved. This mood quickly changes to rage when he sees Kiki sitting in on Monty's lecture. This reveals a double standard that, though Howard has had multiple infidelities, he still wants to exert control over his family.

When Levi runs into Carl on the Wellington campus, he is disgusted with the friend he once admired. Upon first meeting Carl, Levi felt he was an access point to the "street" world Levi so greatly coveted. To see a representation of those ideals working for Wellington is essentially Levi's greatest nightmare. Levi thinks, "...it was so strange to stand next to this ex-Carl, this played-out fool, this shell of a brother in whom all that was beautiful and thrilling and true had utterly evaporated" (389).

At the end of the section, Howard and Kiki have a sex for the first time in the novel. Unlike Howard's sexual encounter with Victoria, there is real emotion and feeling when he is with Kiki. This reinforces the womanly, maternal beauty that Kiki exhibits and yet neither she, nor Howard, is capable of fully recognizing it. Despite its beauty and pleasure, Howard and Kiki's encounter is completely centered around nostalgia. During their intercourse, both of them are thinking about old times, and when they finish, Kiki realizes there is no way to make things right in the present. As opposed to being a step towards reconciliation, Howard and Kiki having sex more firmly cements the fact that they have grown too far apart to ever be whole again.

Discussion Question 1

Why do you think Howard fled the hotel room and left Victoria?

Discussion Question 2

Do you think it is positive or negative that Carl is working for Wellington?

Discussion Question 3

Why do you think Kiki agrees to give Howard "a little more time?"

Vocabulary

foible

3. On Beauty and Being Wrong, Chapter 11-13

Summary

Jerome is home for spring break and he and Kiki sit in the backyard and talk. Kiki assures Jerome that she and Howard will fully support him, particularly in regards to his religion. Kiki also asks if Jerome will spend some time with Levi, who has become engrossed with his new group of friends. Jerome reluctantly agrees, and takes Murdoch for a walk down to Wellington, where Levi is hanging out among the Haitian protesters. He finds Levi sitting among Choo and others, having lunch. Their conversation is awkward and stilted, neither quite sure what to say.

Levi heads out and into the Black Studies Department, when he finds Carl in the library. Levi asks to hear a Haitian group, and the head librarian heads off to find it. Meanwhile, Carl excitedly tells Levi that he has been hooking up with Victoria, and that she has been sending him pictures. Levi is uninterested.

When Levi returns home, Kiki asks why he has been crying, but Levi does not bother to explain the experience he just had listening to the Haitian group in the music library. Meanwhile, all of the children are preparing to go out: Levi to the Bus Stop and Jerome and Zora to a frat party. At the party, Jerome feels slightly awkward seeing Victoria is there. Zora excitedly talks to Carl, but he quickly excuses himself. Later in the night, Zora is still thinking about Carl. A very drunk Jerome finds her and says he has just seen Carl and Victoria in the coat room together. Zora, drunk and angry, goes to the coat room and drags Carl outside. Zora verbally attacks Carl, implying he is ungrateful for all of the work she has done for him so he could stay at Wellington. Carl is hurt too, surprised that Zora was only helping him because she expected a boyfriend out of the deal. Victoria joins them outside, demanding to know what's going on. Zora begins insulting Victoria, which infuriates Carl. He begins speaking of Howard, and Victoria tries to stop him. Jerome understands what is unsaid and pieces together his father and Victoria. Victoria goes inside, but Carl is still angry. He rails against the people of Wellington, how they are only capable of lying and deceiving. Zora retaliates, saying Carl could never belong here. Carl says that Monty Kipps has been having sex with Chantelle Williams, and he is now trying to have her kicked out of Wellington so she will keep quiet about the situation. The argument dissipates and Jerome and Zora leave the party.

Chapter 12 begins with the first day of spring. Zora is woken up early, as Jack French has called, demanding she come to Wellington immediately. She arrives to find Jack, Erskine, Claire, and Monty all assembled. Erskine explains that a very valuable painting belonging to Monty was stolen last night, and Carl is a prime suspect. They want to know if Zora has any information on his whereabouts or his character.

Back at home, Kiki is starting spring cleaning. She starts on Levi's room, and Jerome comes to help her. Under Levi's bed, Kiki finds the stolen painting and is shocked. Levi attempts to defend himself, saying that he and his friend stole it so they could "redistribute" the wealth to Haiti, where Monty stole the painting from the poor. Still, Kiki is livid. Jerome spots a notecard tucked in the back of the painting. It is a message from Carlene saying, "Kiki -- please enjoy this painting. It needs to be loved by someone like you. Your friend, Carlene" (430).

Meanwhile, Zora and Howard return to the house together. Zora says she has a "bombshell" for the next faculty meeting: the information about Monty and Chantelle. Howard laughs ruefully, but this only upsets Zora more. She confronts her father about Victoria and he gives himself away. Zora, done defending her father, rushes to tell Kiki the news.

In Chapter 13, it is summer once again. Howard is signing paperwork declaring an official separation. Kiki has moved out to an apartment of her own. Howard remains at the home with the children, as he has been forced to take a sabbatical. Nevertheless, today he is giving a lecture that will determine whether or not he receives tenure. If he does not, then he will move on to another college. Meanwhile, Monty was also at risk of losing his job and thus allowed discretionaries to remain on campus. Nevertheless, Carl dropped out of the poetry class and has not been seen or heard from since.

Howard heads out to his meeting, listening to *Lacrimosa* in the car. He arrives quite late and realizes he has left his notes in the car. He begins his lecture and realizes that Kiki is there, in the sixth row. They smile at each other from across the room.

Analysis

During Carl's explosive argument with Zora, he reveals harsh yet realistic perspectives of Wellington and its community. "'You people don't behave like human beings, man,' he says. 'I ain't never seen people behave like you people. You don't tell the truth, you deceive people/ You all act so superior, but you're not telling the truth! ... My daddy's a worthless piece of shit, too, but at least I know he's a worthless piece of shit'" (417). In this outburst, Carl's budding affection and admiration for Wellington is washed away. As an outside observer, he has seen how Wellington, though claiming to be champions of education, is actually an institution built on exclusivity and deceit. This claim is only further supported when Carl reveals that Monty has been sleeping with Chantelle, and Monty is attempting to cover his tracks by having Chantelle barred from attending Wellington classes. Though Carl does not touch on all of these points directly, he has essentially exposed that all of the major players at Wellington have ulterior motives other than perpetuating education.

Kiki's spring cleaning is symbolic of the overhaul that is soon to come. During the cleaning itself, though, Kiki reflects on how things have stayed the same. "Last year, she had not thought she would still be in this house, in this marriage, come spring. But here she was, here she was" (424). Almost a year has past, and Kiki has gone through

numerous phases of peace and frustration with Howard. Now, though, she seems ready to accept that she has stayed, and make peace with the consequences of that decision. As Kiki cleans, she takes in the physical evidence of her husband and children. She thinks, "The greatest lie ever told about love is that it sets you free" (424). This quote, though referencing the physical manifestation of love, has much deeper implications for Kiki. Though Kiki's love for Howard has remained, it has become more of a physical and mental burden than it has a joyful expression of feeling. Kiki wants to believe that she and Howard will someday return to that joyful place, but just as the old photographs and family memorabilia continue to pile up, the loathing and resentment for Howard will only continue to build. Zora revealing Howard's affair with Victoria will soon be the final straw that pushes Kiki to live her own life.

Zora confronting her father about Victoria is a revelatory experience for Zora herself. She has spent her life idolizing Howard and all he represents. Now, she must come to terms with the fact that he has failed so completely. Zora now sees her father as a flawed human and may start to grow as her own person, separated from the ways of Wellington.

At the end of Chapter 12, "Mother and daughter were already calling for each other, one running upstairs and one running down, each with rich, strange news" (433). This moment is critical because it associates Kiki discovering her possession of Carlene's painting with the information that will drive her to leave Howard. The convergence of these two moments signify Kiki's reclamation of her beauty, her power, and her self-worth.

In Chapter 13, when Kiki and Howard are officially separated and Howard is on a forced sabbatical, there is a noticeable change in Howard's character. He is much more relaxed and unconcerned with his former rules and regulations. He freely gives Levi his allowance and jokes along with his children when they poke fun at him. He even listens to Mozart's *Lacrimosa* during his car ride, when just a few months prior, he was condemning the song as religious propaganda. Throughout his marital difficulties with Kiki, Howard was always the one asking for more time together. Yet, their separation reveals that Howard benefitted just as much from space and solitude as Kiki did, indicating that Howard's attempts at remaining with Kiki stemmed from the same fear of change and fear of a lack of control that caused him to have an affair in the first place.

Still, Kiki is deeply missed by the family and Murdoch, the dog, acts as a stand-in for her at the Belsey household. The family is eager to make up the affection they realize Kiki deserved, but that they never took the time to bestow upon her.

At the end of the novel, Howard is giving a lecture to determine whether or not he will receive tenure, and Kiki is in attendance. This is the first time in the novel that Howard, when speaking about the beauty and importance of art, has been able to equate it to the beauty in his own life. While discussing the painting *Hendrickje Bathing*, Howard pauses to admire his wife in the audience. He does not force the intellectual premise of his work onto his personal life, but allows the meaning behind the art to come to him as he admires Kiki.



The novel ends with no definitive answers, and its last line, "...intimation of what's to come," suggests that Howard and Kiki's story, whatever the end may be, is not yet finalized.

Discussion Question 1

Describe Zora and Carl's fight. What are some things that might have gone unsaid?

Discussion Question 2

Do you think Levi was justified in stealing the painting?

Discussion Question 3

Make a prediction about what might happen to the Belsey family after the end of the book.

Vocabulary

mordantly, euphemistically, protectorate, chidingly, plangent



Characters

Howard Belsey

Howard Belsey is a 57-year-old man of British descent. He is a professor of Art History at Wellington College, where his studies focus on Rembrandt. Howard has three children, Levi, Zora, and Jerome, with his wife Kiki. Before the events of the novel, Howard has an affair with Claire Malcolm, a poetry professor at Wellington. During the course of the novel, Howard has another affair with Victoria Kipps. At the end of the novel, Howard and Kiki are legally separated.

Howard is a very judgmental person with very specific tastes. His academic studies seep into all other areas of his life, and serves as the basis for very specific preferences, such as not allowing any representational art or music at home. Howard cares deeply about his wife and children, but his actions often reflect the opposite, and reveal a deeper focus on excitement and feeling young again.

Kiki Belsey

Kiki Belsey is a 53-year-old woman of African descent. She is a nurse at the local hospital in Wellington. During the course of the novel, Kiki wrestles with Howard's infidelity and the impact it has on her own self-perception. Kiki is getting older, nearing menopause, and losing the slender figure she once had.

Kiki is very sentimental and very caring. She takes care of her children and Howard to the best of her ability, but is actually very lonely. Kiki reaches out to Carlene Kipps in an attempt to make friends and gain new insight. After Carlene's death, Kiki more resolutely realizes she must end her marriage for the sake of her own happiness.

Zora Belsey

Zora Belsey is the middle child of Howard and Kiki and the only daughter. She is a sophomore at Wellington, where she is a top student. Zora is very headstrong and opinionated, but in the novel, she struggles with the fact that her opinionated appearance is merely an act - she really has no private passions at all. Zora falls for the handsome outsider Carl, and invests all of her energy into their relationship, only to find he is not romantically interested in her.

Zora greatly admires her father, and loves the structure of the academic world. She views her mother as weak for not leaving Howard, yet simultaneously sees Howard as blameless. This changes when she discovers her father had an affair with Victoria Kipps.

Levi Belsey

Levi is 15 years old and the youngest child of the Belsey family. He attends a private high school in Wellington. Levi does not care for his family's wealth or established position in the Wellington community. Instead, Levi wishes he could spend his time among the young black men of Boston. After quitting his job at a music superstore, Levi starts to hang around Haitian bootleggers in the city. He becomes an ardent supporter of the Haitian cause, and even goes so far as to steal the painting of Maitresse Erzulie from Monty Kipps' office.

Jerome Belsey

Jerome Belsey is a college student at Brown University, and the oldest of the Belsey children. At the start of the novel, Jerome is studying abroad and staying at the Kipps residence in London. He has a brief romance and engagement with Victoria Kipps that ends quickly. During this time with the Kippses, Jerome adopts Christian beliefs, which he commits to even after leaving London.

Jerome is more level-headed and wiser than his siblings. He favors Kiki, and feels that Howard's transgressions against the family go far beyond the affair.

Claire Malcolm

Claire Malcolm is a 53-year-old poetry professor at Wellington College. She is a very popular teacher, and her students are referred to as "the cult of Claire." Just before the affair comes to light, Claire marries her partner, a scientist named Warren. She reflects on her tendency to sabotage herself and she and Warren remain together. Claire is perceived as vapid or unintellectual by others, but she is actually very self-reflective and keenly aware of the world around her.

Throughout the novel, Claire is focused on keeping "discretionary" students, such as Carl, in her class and petitions the school to uphold this rule, which Monty Kipps is attempting to take down.

Jack French

Jack French is the Dean of the Humanities at Wellington College. Throughout the novel, he serves as the mediator for the dealings of Howard, Claire, and Monty. He is an old-fashioned Dean who is susceptible to university politics.

Monty Kipps

Monty Kipps is a British professor of Art History and rival to Howard. Monty is very popular and has published a highly successful book on Rembrandt. Monty is also deeply conservative, Christian, and anti-liberal. During the course of the novel, Monty and his family come to Wellington, as Monty has been hired as an adjunct professor. Monty stirs the local community with his plans to deliver a series of lectures about taking the “liberal” out of “liberal studies.”

Carlene Kipps

Carlene Kipps is Monty's wife. She is a kind, yet outspoken woman who is befriended by Kiki over the course of the novel. She holds the same conservative, Christian views as her husband, and has spent her life serving her family. Midway through the novel, Carlene passes away due to an aggressive cancer, an illness that has evidenced itself physically, but that she never revealed to her family or friends. Carlene is a lover of art, and leaves her favorite painting to Kiki after her passing.

Victoria Kipps

Victoria Kipps is the daughter of Monty and Carlene. At the start of the novel, Victoria is briefly engaged to Michael. Upon her relocation to Wellington, where she becomes a student, Victoria starts a flirtation with Howard. This quickly develops into a sexual relationship following Carlene's passing. Eventually, Howard ends things, much to Victoria's disappointment. At the end of the novel, Victoria is seeing Carl.

Victoria is described as incredibly beautiful, and everyone around her frequently comments on her appearance. She is insecure, though, as evidenced by her numerous romantic affairs throughout the novel and her emotional volatility.

Carl

Carl is a young black man from the inner-city area of Roxbury. Carl meets the Belsey family at a Mozart concert in Boston, as he has a passion for music and is a rapper/poet who performs at venues such as the Bus Stop. After one such performance, Claire invites Carl into her class, where he is a huge success. Later in the novel, Carl gets a job in the Black Studies department as a Hip-Hop Archivist. Carl relishes this job, but quits after a massive fight involving Zora, Jerome, Victoria, and himself. Carl feels he can never be truly accepted by the academic society of Wellington, and at the end of the novel, nobody can get in touch with him.

Symbols and Symbolism

Cigarettes/Smoking

Cigarettes are a symbol of how the Belsey family internalizes their emotions. When Howard's affair is revealed and the family begins to splinter, all of the Belseys, besides Levi, take up smoking. Levi repeats his anti-smoking stance throughout the novel, which is symbolic of the ways in which he does not want to participate in his family's drama.

The Anniversary Gift

The beautiful anniversary gift is a symbol of Kiki and Howard's positive outward appearance hiding a much darker reality. At Kiki and Howard's anniversary party, Christian Von Klepper and Meredith gift Kiki with a framed embroidered Shakespeare quote. The quote, which is taken from "The Tempest" and the pearlescent frame are both outwardly beautiful, but signal manipulation and false appearances lurking just below the surface.

The Abstract Painting

The presence of this painting symbolizes Howard's dominance in dictating the Belsey's lives. In the Belsey home, only abstract art is allowed as Howard finds representational art "vulgar." This painting in particular, shows something that appears to be a crumpled-up linen cloth being tossed in the air, signaling the readiness of both Howard and Kiki to "toss" their marriage. During Howard and Kiki's first explosive fight, they slam the door so hard that the painting falls to the ground, showing the destructive force of their anger.

Maitresse Erzulie

The painting of Maitresse Erzulie is a symbol for Kiki's inner strength and beauty, and how she fails to recognize her own power and potential. At the start of the novel, a portrait of Maitresse Erzulie hangs in the Kipps residence. It depicts a full-figured black woman surrounded by brightly-colored flowers. Kiki admires the painting, which belongs to Carlene. Upon Carlene's death, Kiki is left the painting, but does not find out about this gift until Levi steals the painting from Monty's office.

Seated Nude

Seated Nude is a symbol for the way that Howard fails to recognize the beauty of his wife and family. Seated Nude is an engraving of a middle-aged woman who has clearly worked hard and born numerous children, yet her face is young and full of energy.



Whereas students like Katie Armstrong are able to see how genuinely beautiful this engraving is, Howard looks at it with cold calculation.

Book on Haiti

Levi's book on Haiti is a symbol for his own privileged point of view in joining the Haitian cause. Levi gets the book from the massive, archaic library of the public school he attends. Yet, he reads the book and is genuinely emotionally taken by the plight of the country and its people. Nevertheless, it is impossible for Levi to ever separate himself from the well-off world he comes from.

Lacrimosa

The Mozart song Lacrimosa is a symbol of mourning the Belsey marriage. The family sees a performance of the song early in the novel, and the haunting melody resonates deeply with Kiki. Howard, however, is against the religious themes of the music. At the end of the novel, Howard plays the song loudly in his car. He is mourning his marriage, but also finding celebration in release from his own rules.

Kiki's Belly

Kiki's belly is a symbol of how her body is changing and the implications that has. It is evidenced in the novel that, over the past ten or so years, Kiki's body has transformed from slender to incredibly buxom. Because of Howard's affair with Claire, a very slender woman, Kiki is all the more self-conscious of the way her body takes up space and is perceived by others.

Murdoch

Murdoch is a symbol of comfort and security. When the Belseys are having tense conversations, Murdoch is often lurking nearby, or someone is holding him close. At the end of the novel, when Kiki is living in her own apartment, the family turns to Murdoch as a surrogate for her presence. Murdoch becomes a symbol for Kiki and the other Belseys lavish affection upon him.

Hendrickje Bathing

Hendrickje Bathing is a symbol for Howard finally understanding how to separate his work and his personal life. Howard lectures on this painting at the very end of the novel, and sees Kiki in the audience. He is taken aback by her beauty, and is able to recognize that same beauty in the painting. Slowly, it appears he is emerging from the corruption of love and academia that has plagued him.

Settings

Belsey Residence

The Belsey home is a large, traditional New England-style brick building. Kiki, Howard, Zora, Levi, and Jerome live here. Though once grand, the house is now slightly shabby.

The house was bequeathed from Kiki's side of the family -- her great grandmother was nurse who inherited the home from a "benevolent white doctor with whom she had worked closely for twenty years," (17). Though the home is essentially Kiki's birthright and represents the lineage of her family, the present state of the house is more reflective of Howard's sensibilities: Howard allows no representational art or music to exist in the house.

At the end of the novel, when Kiki and Howard separate, Kiki is the one who leaves the house and gets an apartment of her own. This represents her forging a new life for herself outside of the traditions of her family.

Wellington College

Wellington College, named after the town of which it is the focal point, is a small liberal arts university. The college is similar to other types of institutions in New England, with brick buildings, lush green space, and musty outdated rooms and technology. Academically, there is a focus on the arts and humanities.

At Wellington, Jack is the Dean of Humanities, Howard and Monty are professors of Art History, Claire is a poetry professor, and Zora and Victoria are students. Throughout the novel, all of these characters are forced to deal with the bureaucracy, favoritism, and faux-celebrities that dictate the future of the institution.

The Bus Stop

The Bus Stop is an artsy cafe located in Wellington. It is home to an open mic night, where poets, rappers, and other artists regularly perform. It is a place significant to the plot of the novel because it represents an intersection between the elites of Wellington and the disenfranchised of nearby Roxbury. This image literally comes together in Chapter 7 of the anatomy lesson when Claire's class attends an open mic night and sees performances by Levi and his Haitian friends, as well as by Carl.

Roxbury

Roxbury is an area outside of Wellington that is home to a lower socioeconomic class. Many black people live in Roxbury, including many of Haitian descent. Carl, Choo, and

Chantelle all live in Roxbury. Levi idealizes the area, and sees it as “real” in comparison to his life in Wellington -- yet when he goes to visit Choo he realizes things being different do not always mean they are better. At the end of the novel, Carl expresses feelings of alienation and otherness from Wellington because he is from Roxbury.

London

London is the home of the Kipps family, as well as Howard’s birthplace. It is the site of what spurs the novel, as well as its turning point. At the start of the book, Howard must go to London to retrieve Jerome from where he is staying with the Kipps family. Midway through the book, both the Belsey and the Kipps families return to London for Carlene’s funeral. For Howard, London represents his alternating love and hatred for his roots.

Themes and Motifs

The Image

The author shows repeatedly in *On Beauty* that the idea of image is a theme that reflects how art is organically present in everyday life. The text has such a strong focus on fine art, and in particular the works of Old Masters such as Rembrandt. Throughout the novel, these paintings are frequently referred to, but there is also a heavy emphasis on the powerful images in everyday life, and scene descriptions rely on organic vignettes. This both reflects how steeped in art Howard's life has become, but also the simpler beauty of the day-to-day that Howard often fails to recognize.

In Chapter 2 of Part 1, the first major image is introduced: the Belsey home. The author focuses extensively on in-depth description of the home's history and present appearance. The house itself could be considered a piece of art, with such a rich history that has been influenced by the hand of so many.

In Chapter 8 of Part 1, Levi sees Carlene Kipps for the first time and takes in every detail of her being. Though she is described as having "crazy" hair and shapeless clothes, the overall impact of the image is absolutely striking.

In Chapter 2 of Part 2, Howard notes the contents of Kiki's nightstand: "The packet of anti-depressants, sitting alongside a few coins, some earplugs, a teaspoon, all crushed in a small wooden Indian box with elephants carved upon its sides" (144). This small vignette can be pictured so easily, and the assortment of objects is reminiscent of the way tools and scientific objects were displayed in Renaissance art.

Many other such images are repeated throughout the novel, and elevate everyday scenarios to something worthy of further study. The idea of the image is significant because, in the world of Wellington, academics do not wish to believe that anything outside their scholarly realm could have significance. Yet, outside of the confines of Wellington are thousands of small, beautiful moments that subvert the traditional expectations of "art."

Marriage

Marriage and romantic relationships are the driving force of this novel. Kiki and Howard, Carlene and Monty, and Claire and Warren represent the three main relationships focused on in the novel. All of the characters are, in one way or another, impacted by the web of these marriages.

Kiki and Howard are at the center of this theme, as they are about to celebrate their 30th wedding anniversary, but are struggling through a slog of marital difficulties, which are only spurred by Howard's infidelity. In Part 1, Chapter 2, their marriage is described like a house. It has not grown very far in any particular direction, but has only grown

more complicated and internalized. Kiki and Howard represent a type of marriage that has grown into a phase of resentment. Though they love each other, they must come to terms with the fact that they no longer function as a married couple.

Monty and Carlene's marriage is much more streamlined and free of complications. Carlene is content serving Monty in any way she can and living her life according to his whims. This represents a highly traditional type of marriage based on patriarchal, Christian values. Despite this, they seem happy. Through her conversations with Carlene, Kiki aims to find answers regarding her own marriage -- yet she only finds contrasts between herself and Carlene as wives and mothers. Still, Carlene helps Kiki realize that she is at a crossroads where she must decide if the rest of her life will be dedicated to her husband, or if she still has a bulk of her own life to live.

Claire's marriage to her husband Warren provides yet another perspective: a focus on honesty and self-control. When Claire reflects on her marriage after the details of her affair have been revealed, she is filled with genuine sorrow for her actions and a resolve to mend her life. This contrasts the way Howard is reckoning with his infidelity, and his failure to truly admit wrongdoing to himself or to Kiki. This also contrasts Carlene's attitude of total forgiveness.

Beyond these three married couples, all other characters touched upon in the novel are impacted by the inner-workings of these couples. The Belsey children take sides between their parents, with Jerome heavily criticizing Howard and Zora ardently defending him. Though they never explicitly mourn their parents' split, it is an impetus for all three children to question themselves.

Racial Identity

Race is a complicated subject for the Belsey family and the surrounding community of Wellington, as they all demonstrate a degree of racism, often without even realizing it. Kiki and her children represent only a handful of people of color living in the mostly-white area. The individual members of the Belsey family struggle with this aspect of their identity in different ways. Kiki internalizes her frustrations, while Levi actively seeks out other young black men. Howard attempts to remove himself entirely from this equation, and cringes at discussions of race, even as they pertain to his children.

The family first meets Carl at the Mozart concert in Part 1, Chapter 7. As Carl is a young black man, the reader witnesses how each of the Belsey family members react to race. Kiki is borderline flirtatious, and her loneliness for people like her is exposed. Levi is incredibly curious about Carl and makes an immediate attempt to befriend him. Howard is distracted before promptly telling Carl he looks like one of the "four African heads," by Rubens.

The unspoken prejudice against black people is evidenced in Part 1, Chapter 9, when Levi returns home from work. A passerby stops to watch Levi enter the house, thinking that he is breaking and entering. Zora shoos the onlooker away in a manner that says

she has done this before. When Levi mentions the incident to his father, Howard retreats and thinks of how much he dislikes having conversations about race with his children. Though Howard claims to be open and accepting of racial diversity, his private thoughts indicate he practically thinks of his family as white.

During Howard and Kiki's major fight in Part 2, Chapter 7, Kiki expresses a major facet of resentment for Howard: he brought her to live in Wellington, far away from her family and far away from other black people. Howard is not very sympathetic to this plight, and feels Kiki should take responsibility for her choice. Kiki's proactive attempts to befriend Carlene are an attempt to reclaim a part of her blackness.

Throughout the novel, Levi becomes increasingly involved with the struggle of the Haitian community. He befriends a group of bootleggers who are also committed to fair wages for immigrant workers. He can often be seen reading a book about the plight of the Haitian country, and later listens to Haitian music in the Black Studies Department library. Levi's fascination with inner-city black culture transitions from completely aesthetic to deeply political. So much so that Levi becomes judgmental of Carl, whom he once admired, for "selling out" and accepting a position at Wellington, which Levi sees as a symbol of oppression.

Physical Beauty and Self-Image

Every character in the novel is either struggling to understand beauty in others or in themselves, bringing them on a journey of self-discovery. Howard struggles with the fact that beauty, even as an abstract concept, has become completely intertwined with his academic work. Because of this, he is incapable of accepting the changes happening to Kiki's body and finding beauty in the evolution of their marriage. Instead, he remains fixated on an ideal, which halts his growth as an individual. Howard's brief affair with Victoria is an attempt to recapture that physical ideal.

Kiki and Zora struggle with their body image and understanding of physical beauty. In Part 1, Chapter 5 we are first introduced to Kiki's complicated relationship with her body. Though she once found power in her large bust and curvaceous figure, she begins to question her worthiness of occupying so much physical space. It is perhaps no coincidence that Kiki starts to question her weight and her womanly figure after the revelation that her husband had an affair with Claire. Claire is the physical opposite of Kiki, which only causes her to question her physicality even more. In Part 2, Chapter 1, the reader sees that Zora, too, is dealing with similar anxieties. Though she is incredibly intelligent, she has yet to figure out what she truly believes in and who she truly is. She attempts to exert her physical beauty for Carl, for whom she develops feelings. When she finds out Carl is seeing Victoria, Zora's loathing for Victoria doubles, as Victoria represents a physical ideal that Zora could never hope to achieve.

In Part 2, Chapter 10, Katie Armstrong considers the etching *Seated Nude*. The woman is middle aged, has clearly born numerous children, yet still beautiful and full of life. This parallels Kiki's present situation, but provides a perspective that exposes just how

beautiful she actually is. While Howard analyzes the etching with cold calculation, someone like Katie Armstrong is able to understand the power in the image.

At the end of the novel, Howard is finally able to come to terms with his failure to truly “see” beauty and succeeds in differentiating classical, artistic ideals from his own, real life. In the final scene, Howard is lecturing on a painting of Rembrandt’s wife. Rather than interpret the painting with cold detachment, Howard is able to see how his real life, and Kiki sitting in the audience, emulates the same kind of power that makes beautiful art so special. Kiki, too, comes full circle in that she is able to finally leave Howard. Rather than continuing to wait for him and come to terms with Kiki, Kiki realizes she must forge her own path, where she is responsible only for herself. In this final scene, she is wearing a scarlet ribbon woven through her hair, which signifies a romantic power as well as a dedication to one’s own physical beauty.

Academia

The author demonstrates a belief throughout the novel that the world of academia, which serves as the backdrop for this novel, is an institution that wants to do the right thing, but often ends up causing harm. Wellington is a small liberal arts college, where most things (including the faculty) have stayed the same for decades. Though universities abound with resources and promote affirmative action, drawing in a more diverse body of students, the bureaucracy and conflicting personalities that make up Wellington can be destructive. The arrival of the Kipps family to Wellington shakes things up, as Monty aims to remove the “liberal” from liberal arts and transform the line of thinking that is considered standard at a New England institution. Though Monty, a conservative Christian, is portrayed as an antagonist, the negative pushback to his ideas reveal a closed-mindedness that no academic liberal would want to admit to.

Part 1, Kipps and Belsey, focuses largely on establishing the grandeur and the tradition of the university. The anniversary party paints Howard as well-liked and the campus as a bustling realm of thought. Zora is a student at the top of her class who seems motivated and primed for success.

Part 2, The Anatomy Lesson, sows the seeds of destruction for Wellington, beginning with the rapidly-spreading rumors of Howard and Claire. Zora then manipulates her way into Claire’s exclusive poetry class, and Claire and Jack must reckon with the nature of “the system” and the deceit it allows for.

Part 3, On Beauty and Being Wrong, demonstrates how academia can actually be a tool of exclusion for the people of Wellington. At the faculty meeting, Howard and Monty debate the finer points of affirmative action, freedom of speech, and campus politics. Though they both clearly care about the issues at hand, there is also a personal rivalry between the two men that no doubt influences their viewpoints. Carl receives a job in the Black Studies department and he can’t deny the pride that he and his family feel regarding this appointment. Yet, the cause at the root of his appointment is

underhanded, bureaucratic dealings that focus less on Carl's actual ability than the need to prove a point.

In Part 3, Chapter 8, Kiki talks with Monty and jokes, "All's fair in love and...and academia" (366). This quote, drawing on the traditional expression, equates academia to war. Academia is strategic, calculated, and, worst of all, destructive.

Styles

Point of View

This novel is told from the third-person omniscient perspective. This means that the narrator is not a character in the story and, therefore, can see any character at any time and understand their thoughts. This narrative style helps the reader to better make sense of the many characters and the inner-workings of many different relationships that are being described. For example, the reader gets both Howard and Kiki's perspectives on their marriage, thus creating an even more rich and complicated portrait of their relationship.

Occasionally, the author chooses to focus on the inner-workings of a character who is not central to the main plot. This occurs with characters like Claire Malcolm or Katie Armstrong, and provides both a respite from the inner-workings of the main characters, as well as new perspectives on the course of events. Both Claire and Katie provide illumination to the personalities and appearances of other characters that one does not get to see when looking through the eyes of that character.

Language and Meaning

The novel makes use of many different dialects and modes of speech. There is Howard and the Kippses British English, Kiki's occasional "Florida" drawl, the "transatlantic" accents of Jerome and Zora, and the faux-street slang of Levi. The characters "code-switch" -- that is, adapt their way of speaking to appear more assimilated -- throughout the novel, depending on the time and place.

Another layer to this is the difference in vocabulary between Wellington and life outside the college. Scenes taking place at Wellington, particularly in a classroom, are filled with complicated sentences structures and lengthy vocabulary words. Howard's lectures are almost indecipherable, but his day-to-day speech is much easier to understand. Kiki, when talking to other black people, relaxes her use of "proper" English, signaling a comfort and desire to fit in.

Dialogue is incredibly important to the themes of this book. Because the relationships discussed in the novel rely so heavily on appearances or the creation of an image, the way one chooses to represent themselves through speech is essential to understand how they aim to appear and be interpreted as a person.

Structure

The novel begins when Jerome is staying with the Kipps family in London. After his bungled engagement to Victoria, Howard retrieves him. This opening sequence of events establishes the characters, their relationships, and the relationship between the

Belsey and Kipps families. The novel then skips ahead nine months, to a point where Howard has already confessed to his infidelity and Kiki has accepted his apology. The novel continues at a relatively straightforward pace from this point on, with a linear timeline that runs from one summer to the next.

The novel is broken into three sections, “Kipps and Belsey,” “The Anatomy Lesson,” and “On Beauty and Being Wrong.” These titles serve as loose descriptors for the content of the section. “Kipps and Belsey” deals with establishing the relationship between the two families,

“The Anatomy Lesson,” wrestles with Howard’s carnal desires and Kiki and Zora’s self-discovery, while “On Beauty and Being Wrong,” explores the power Howard finds in admitting his failings and the beauty the characters are able to find in themselves.

The novel has a tendency to not depict key scenes, but only show either the build-up or the aftermath of certain scenarios. For example, the reader never witnesses when Howard first confesses his affair to Kiki, but only sees the aftermath of the situation. Similarly, at the end of the novel, one never sees Zora tell Kiki about Howard’s affair with Victoria, nor does one see Kiki stake a claim to Carlene’s painting. Many such examples can be found throughout the text, and the novel is actually given much of its structure from things the reader never sees.

Quotes

It was an offer to kick open a door in the mansion of their marriage leading to an antechamber of misery.

-- Narrator (chapter 2)

Importance: This quote occurs during Howard and Kiki's first squabble. It reveals there is long-standing trouble in their marriage, separate from the events that will soon occur. The quote also gives shape to their relationship: it is a "house" with many rooms, doors, and secrets hidden within its walls.

Each couple is its own vaudeville act.

-- Narrator (chapter 5)

Importance: Kiki has this thought when talking with Claire Malcolm and her new husband, Warren. It reveals the bitterness within Kiki, and the negative outlook she now has on new relationships. She is currently attempting to forgive Howard for his infidelity (though she does not yet know it was with Claire), and therefore she understands all-too-well the act of trying to appear a certain way, while secretly feeling completely differently.

A family doesn't work any more when everyone in it is more miserable than they would be if they were alone. You know?

-- Jerome (chapter 5)

Importance: Jerome is still mourning his failed engagement to Victoria Kipps, and he is equally upset about his father's infidelity. Though Kiki is attempting to keep up appearances, Jerome provides an alternative perspective: one that admits to the failings of the family, and a need to sometimes just give up on something.

Full fathom five thy father lies; Of his bones are coral made, Those are pearls that were his eyes. Nothing of him doth fade, Both doth suffer a sea-change, Into something rich and strange.

-- Narrator (chapter 11)

Importance: This quote, taken from Shakespeare's "The Tempest" is inscribed on an anniversary gift given to Kiki and Howard. These lines come from a section known as "Ariel's Song" which is filled with language of manipulation and transformation, yet told with beautiful words. This references how Kiki and Howard are intent in maintaining a presentable image, while it is actually based on trickery more than genuine desire.

A university is among the precious things that can be destroyed.

-- Elaine Scarry (chapter 1)

Importance: This quote appears at the start of Part 2, The Anatomy Lesson. Though not a quote from the novel itself, it is representative of the impending changes to



Wellington. The university is about to be rocked not only by the scandal of Howard and Claire, but by the outspoken voice of Monty Kipps, and the culture wars that will ensue. In the process, the very integrity of the college system will be brought into question.

Kiki felt herself a whetstone that Zora was sharpening herself against.
-- Narrator (chapter 6)

Importance: Zora consistently remains on Howard's side of things throughout the novel. Consequently, she and her mother frequently butt heads over even the smallest of issues. Yet, ironically, they are both dealing with similar internal struggles. Kiki must remain cool and calm around Zora, lest Zora find an opening to attack.

I don't care what the doctors say, the eyes and the heart are directly connected.
-- Carlene (chapter 11)

Importance: This expresses Carlene's philosophy that worldly beauty is directly connected to love. This reflects Kiki's sentimentality and belief she is not an intellectual. This is the opposite theory presented by Howard, who finds beauty only in the detachment of emotions from visual stimuli.

He just did not believe, as his father did, that time is how you spend your love.
-- Narrator (chapter 3)

Importance: Howard thinks this as he flees from his father's house. His father has been mourning the loss of his wife, and Howard's mother, since her death, which occurred decades ago. Howard sees this dedication as pathetic, but it is ironic in the sense that he begs Kiki for more time to make things right between them. Though Howard wants to believe that he is the opposite of his father, they are much more alike than he will admit.

All's fair in love and...and academia.
-- Kiki (chapter 8)

Importance: Kiki says this to Monty during a lighthearted conversation about university politics. Yet, it conveys the less-than-lighthearted sentiment that academic life is as dangerous and cutthroat as war.

The greatest lie ever told about love is that it sets you free.
-- Narrator (chapter 12)

Importance: Kiki ponders this thought while doing her spring cleaning. In literal terms, the quote refers to the physical bulk of family mementos she is wading through. Metaphorically, this statement refers to Kiki and Howard's marriage. Though they still love each other, their marriage is broken and that has kept them trapped for the past year.

Was anyone ever genuinely attached to anything?
-- Narrator (chapter 7)

Importance: Zora ponders this question amid thoughts that she does not really have any opinions of her own -- but merely comes up with ideas for the sake of appearing intellectual. The quote also has larger implications for the novel, and begs the question of how two people who have loved each other for so long, could suddenly fall apart.

Something about his academic life had changed love for him, changed its nature.
-- Narrator (chapter 8)

Importance: Claire reflects on her affair with Howard and considers the fact that she went into the affair as a form of self-sabotage, while he entered out of desire. As a third-party, Claire can better understand Howard's relationship to love, and her analysis reveals that Howard is atypical when it comes to relationships, as his academic work has caused too much of an interference with his capacity to love.