

# **The Portable Dorothy Parker Study Guide**

**The Portable Dorothy Parker by Dorothy Parker**

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# Contents

<a href="#">The Portable Dorothy Parker Study Guide.....</a>	<a href="#">1</a>
<a href="#">Contents.....</a>	<a href="#">2</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 1-4.....</a>	<a href="#">3</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 5-8.....</a>	<a href="#">5</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 9.....</a>	<a href="#">8</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 10-13.....</a>	<a href="#">9</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 14-17.....</a>	<a href="#">12</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 18.....</a>	<a href="#">15</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 19-24.....</a>	<a href="#">16</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 25.....</a>	<a href="#">20</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 26-32.....</a>	<a href="#">21</a>
<a href="#">Characters.....</a>	<a href="#">25</a>
<a href="#">Objects/Places.....</a>	<a href="#">28</a>
<a href="#">Themes.....</a>	<a href="#">31</a>
<a href="#">Style.....</a>	<a href="#">33</a>
<a href="#">Quotes.....</a>	<a href="#">36</a>
<a href="#">Topics for Discussion.....</a>	<a href="#">38</a>



# Chapters 1-4

## Chapters 1-4 Summary

In the *Lovely Leave*, Mimi McVicker awaits her husband's return from active duty as a pilot with the Air Force. Steve McVicker has been away for six months and has been granted a short leave to return home. Mimi spends a great deal of time, money and energy preparing for Steve's return, wanting to make the visit as pleasant and memorable as possible. There are new flowers throughout the apartment, a new black dress, and a new nightgown. There will be delicious food and a wife waiting eagerly to see her husband. When Steve returns, he breaks the news that all leaves have been canceled and that he has orders to be on the next train to a new command post. Mimi is thoroughly upset and does nothing the entire time but cry, whine, and try to pick a fight. After Steve leaves, Mimi calls a friend and relays the tale, saying that it was a lovely leave.

*Agreement in Black and White* surrounds a woman's meeting with an up and coming musician. The musician, Walter Williams, is black. The woman makes a point of denouncing prejudice and declaring that it is an honor to meet such a talent. The woman is courteous to Walter and even shakes his hand, an act of which the woman is proud. After the woman leaves Walter's side, she comments to her host that she almost used an unforgivable epithet to Walter, showing her true colors as a bigot.

*The Sexes* is a story surrounding a couple's courtship and the rocky turn it has taken. The woman sits on a sofa, wringing a handkerchief and exhibiting very cold behavior to the man at the other end of the couch. The man tries to talk to the woman and is consistently rebuffed. Eventually, the woman confesses that she feels ignored and that the man had spent the previous evening talking to another woman. The man claims he was trying to be social but the woman would not be appeased. When the man compliments the woman on her beauty, the woman brightens and says she was never angry at all.

Annabel and Midge are the main characters in the *Standard of Living*. Both women are stenographers who enjoy playing a game developed by Annabel about their standard of living should they inherit one million dollars. The only rule is that the money must be spent on oneself. Midge says she will buy a silver-fox coat, only to be chastised by the Annabel since silver-fox coats are common these days. When the game resumes, Midge declares that the first purchase will be a mink coat, a purchase that Annabel approves. Passing by a shop window, the women spot an exquisite double strand of pearls adorned with a large emerald. Midge declares that the weather is not right for a mink coat and instead, she should buy the pearls. Annabel agrees. The women discuss at length the purchase of the pearls and screwing up courage, go inside the shop to find the price is \$250,000. The women leave the shop, dejected. Eventually, the game resumes.



## Chapters 1-4 Analysis

Parker's stories tend to contain a fair amount of sarcasm, irony, and contradiction. The characters often act without regard to others and are often hypocritical and self-centered. In the Lovely Leave, Mimi is obsessed with Steve's return and then does nearly everything to make it unpleasant. Mimi is unstable in a number of ways and could be considered manic. Steve seems to be tired of the ritual and when Mimi discovers that she may have pushed too far, the situation moves in the other direction.

The woman in Agreement in Black and White tries too hard to convince the hostess, and perhaps herself, that she is not a bigot. The woman goes on and on about how prejudice is wrong and that she doesn't understand how people can be that way. The woman gushes upon meeting Walter, complimenting his work and saying that she will be at the next concert. During the conversation, the woman nearly slips when a black woman enters the room and almost refers to the woman with a severely racist slur. The woman is obviously a bigot and is perhaps trying to work her way out of it but is captured by the times.

Both The Standard of Living and The Sexes deal with people who want to be in control. Annabel is the master of the game and directs Midge whenever she doesn't agree with the imaginary purchases Midge will make with the one million dollars. The woman on the couch seeks to dominate the man and puts herself on a pedestal, denying him the right to speak to other women even though it was an innocent gesture.



# Chapters 5-8

## Chapters 5-8 Summary

Mr. Durant is the assistant manager of the credit department at a rubber company. The position has some prestige and Mr. Durant takes pride in his work. As an assistant, Mr. Durant has an office and phone, but no personal secretary. If he wishes to dictate a letter, he may use the boss' secretary or call around to the other offices for a loaner. This is how Mr. Durant meets Rose. Rose is a girl of twenty who is somewhat childish and dresses in clothes that seem cheap and unprofessional. Rose is not pretty by standard definition, yet there is something about her that attracts Mr. Durant. They become involved and begin to have an affair. After a while, Rose confesses that she is pregnant. Mr. Durant has heard that there are things that can be done about unplanned pregnancy. Through the assistance of a co-worker, the abortion was planned and Rose left the company.

Mr. Durant is relieved and jovial about Rose's leave. The stenographer claims that she will not return to the company and wishes to be rid of Mr. Durant forever. Mr. Durant is pleased and views the world as a brighter place. When Mr. Durant returns home, the children flock around full of excitement. A dog had been found and the children wanted to keep it. Mr. Durant, in such a jovial mood, says he will consider keeping the puppy. When Mr. Durant finds out that the puppy is a female, he insists that it cannot be a part of the family. After all, when the males in the neighborhood find out that there is a female at the Durant house, there will be dogs everywhere wanting to mate with her.

A young woman sits at a table and wants nothing more than to be left alone when a gentleman approaches her to ask if she would like to dance. The woman has seen the man dance and is horrified that she should be introduced to such an unpleasant experience. The dance is a waltz and the pair begins to move across the floor. The entire story of *The Waltz* revolves around social politeness. The woman has many funny and unkind thoughts about the man and the many times he has stepped on her feet or kicked her in the shin. Still, the woman is outwardly gracious and polite, encouraging the man to continue to use his inventive moves, which constantly make her trip. At the end, the woman is inwardly relieved and outwardly laments the end of the dance.

The Wonderful Old Gentleman is eighty-four years old and lives with a daughter and son-in-law. Until recently, the old gentleman has been spry and healthy. On the night of the story, the man has suffered a severe stroke and is not expected to live until morning. The man's two daughters meet in the living room and discuss their father and his life. It is amazing that at eight-four the man could still walk upstairs and was always present at the dinner table. Allie Bain, one of the daughters, has taken her father into her home and has cared for him for some time. Allie's son Paul was sent away to work as a lumberjack so the old gentleman would not be disturbed.



Allie and her husband have very little but share it with her father. The other daughter, Hattie Whittaker, is well off and formal. Hattie visits regularly but offers no real help for her father. Hattie tends to hold her position over her sister's head.

The sisters discuss various family members and why they should or should not attend the funeral. A brother will not be invited in case he should show up drunk and others are discounted for other reasons. The old gentleman dies while being tended to by the Bains' boarder. Allie Bain is inconsolable.

Mrs. Martindale walks down the street and notices several soldiers. Mrs. Martindale is a woman of compassion and has a great heart; often approached by charities who seek funds. Mrs. Martindale is a woman of means yet does not hold herself above others. While it may seem ridiculous that Mrs. Martindale would be a working woman, she works five afternoons a week, sewing garments for wounded soldiers.

The supervisor at the sewing factory is not a nice woman and she continually criticizes the work of the volunteers. Mrs. Martindale does not like sewing and isn't very good at it but is determined to help in the time of war.

When the factory closes for a time, the supervisor asks the volunteers to forgo their much-needed vacations and continue to sew at home. Mrs. Martindale agrees and takes twelve uniforms. Mrs. Martindale does not intend to hurry until she sees the soldiers on the street and realizes that they too may need her garments one day. Mrs. Martindale rushes home to sew.

## Chapters 5-8 Analysis

Mr. Durant is worn down and needs some excitement to brighten his life. Although Mr. Durant is married with children, the affair with the stenographer becomes intense and revives the spirit. Mr. Durant does not intend to leave his wife and makes it clear to Rose. When Rose becomes pregnant, Mr. Durant realizes what he has done and must find a way out of the problem. After the problem is solved, Mr. Durant is relieved, continues to notice other women, and realizes that there are many fish in the sea. The episode with the puppy shows that Mr. Durant lives a double standard.

The woman in *The Waltz* shows an uncommon sense of social dignity when faced with the man who wishes to dance. The woman is disgusted with the man who invents his own dance steps and contrives many reasons to avoid him, from pregnancy to tropical disease. Determined not to hurt the man's feelings, the woman dances the waltz, continually excusing the man's bad dance missteps and painful consequences. The woman grits her teeth and follows through with the dance, mentally counting the minutes until it is over. However, when the music ends, the woman agrees with the man that it was over too soon while she mentally waited to escape. In the end, the woman encourages the man to bribe the band to play one more song, as if she hasn't yet paid enough for the kindness.



The Wonderful Old Gentleman has three children mentioned in the story. There is the daughter with whom he lives, another daughter, and a son who is a drunk. Allie is the daughter who cares for the father and struggles to make ends meet. Still, it is her duty. The other daughter, Hattie, is well off and makes regular visits while speaking of the man as if he was a stranger. The son, who resides in Ohio, is not present and will not be called when the old man dies.

The conversation turns to the old man's will. Hattie has seen the will and gloats that she will inherit all the money, since she and her husband will be able to manage it. Allie will receive the furniture and various house wares that the old man has purchased. Allie is inwardly distressed that Hattie should inherit while she is in desperate need. When the old man expires, Allie is inconsolable while Hattie appears to be relieved.

Mrs. Martindale is an extremely compassionate woman who believes that it is important for everyone to support the soldiers as they fight for the country. The woman has even taken jewels and had them set into a flag to show support. While many women of means are involved with charity, Mrs. Martindale devotes a great deal of time as a seamstress. It is not a job she likes but feels it is her duty. Mrs. Martindale is not a good seamstress and struggles to make nice garments. The supervisor at the factory is a shrill and demanding woman, treating the volunteers as slaves. Although Mrs. Martindale and all other volunteers dislike the woman, they continue to work. When the factory shuts down, Mrs. Martindale takes home garments although she doesn't want to do it.

When Mrs. Martindale sees the soldiers on the street, she is reminded of her duty. Even when a friend calls begging for employment for another friend, Mrs. Martindale promises to help and continues to sew.



# Chapter 9

## Chapter 9 Summary

Enough Rope is a series of short poems written by Dorothy Parker. Many of the poems fall into one of three basic categories - loss of love, despair, and death. There are many references to a love that has never been and never will be, leaving Parker alone and in despair. A good example of this theme is Hearthside, in which Parker laments the life she will never have. There are places where the author will never walk and lives that she will never experience. There are people across the world that have these experiences but they could never happen to Parker.

Death is one of Parker's favorite topics. Many poems deal with the dead, whether it is the author or another. Some examples include Braggart and Testament. In Braggart, Parker muses about how the lives of others will continue after she is dead. While the author sees herself as being safe in hell, others will be forced to live on, drying out, suffering and laughing while Parker is among "the roaring dead". In Testament, Parker speaks of being dead in the ground. The author wonders what others will think while the worms do their work.

## Chapter 9 Analysis

It is known that Parker suffered from depression and alcoholism, facts that are made clear through the author's poetry. Many of the poems seem to be a disjointed continuation of others, with varying points of view on the same topic.

There seems to be a great deal of despair revolving around love, whether it is love lost, unrequited, or never found. Parker envies those who have found a love, whether or not it lasts. There are many poems about a love that has strayed or gone away, leaving Parker to her own devices and depression. The author dreams of other lands and cultures where people have found love and experience the things that she will never be privy to in her state of loneliness.

Death is the ultimate fascination for Parker. It seems that the author wants to be reassured that it will matter if and when she dies. Parker wonders if people will send flowers or mourn her absence. In other poems, death seems to be an amusement. Others will be forced to survive and experience pain while Parker will be safely ensconced underground or be burning in hell. The despair felt by Parker is blatant in the poems and one must wonder how exaggerated the tales of loss must be.





# Chapters 10-13

## Chapters 10-13 Summary

A Telephone Call is a story of a woman who is fretting about a phone call that is more than two hours late. Earlier in the day, the woman had called a man at his office and as the man was busy, he said he would call at five o'clock. Five o'clock came and went and the man did not call. The woman is frantic with worry and had a long conversation with God about the man and the phone call that hasn't arrived.

During the conversations with herself and God, the woman wonders if she should have called the man in the first place. Perhaps the man is angry or tired of her. Maybe something has happened to him, such as an unexpected guest or traffic accident. The woman begins to wish that there had been a traffic accident and that the man was dead. The woman bargains with God and curses herself for looking at the clock so often. The woman makes up her mind on several occasions to never bother the man again, that she will die first. The next minute, the woman has herself convinced that she was supposed to make the call, not the man. In the end, the bargaining with God continues, hoping that the deal will make the phone ring.

Here We Are is a tale of a newlywed couple starting off on their honeymoon. The pair has boarded a train bound for New York, where they will check into the Biltmore Hotel. The couple is somewhat formal and stiff at first, perhaps due to nervousness. The woman constantly asks questions of the new husband. Even though the husband gives a truthful and generally positive answer, the woman turns the comment around and blames the man for being disagreeable, mean, or inconsiderate. A comment about a favorite hat leads the woman to believe that her husband hates the expensive new one she is wearing; a comment about a lovely bridesmaid leads the woman to accuse the man of being obsessed with the other woman. The man is baffled by the behavior and tries to smooth things over. Finally, the pair arrives at a truce as they arrive in New York.

Hobie is a man with many women in his life. It is never said if Hobie is a male escort but the conclusion is easy to reach. The story begins with Hobie entertaining Kit, a young woman with whom Hobie is trying to make amends. Hobie is lighthearted and accommodating to Kit, while Kit apologizes for earlier behavior. As the pair make up, the telephone rings. Instantly, Kit is angry but urges Hobie to answer in case it's important. Hobie answers to find another woman on the other end of the line. Hobie tells the woman he is busy with a date and cannot possibly see her that evening.

Hobie returns to the living room, where Kit sits. Kit is angry and begins to complain about the women and how some have decorated the apartment. Hobie says he didn't want to see the woman and assures Kit that the evening belongs to her. The phone rings a second time, then a third. The night wears on and Kit begins to make a fuss about the women who call. Eventually, Kit sets an ultimatum with Hobie. Hobie makes no excuses for his lifestyle and Kit leaves. After Kit leaves, Hobie picks up the phone



and makes a call. A woman will be coming over to the apartment. Estimating that Kit has arrived at home by now, Hobie takes the phone off the hook.

You Were Perfectly Fine is a comedic "short short" about a man who had too much to drink the previous evening. The woman who is sitting there tries hard to console him, repeatedly saying, "You were perfectly fine". As the story progresses, tales of the man's behavior of the previous night surface and the man is increasingly embarrassed. The man spent an hour singing at the top of his lungs at the bar and refused to eat convinced that he had to give the waiter all of his food since the waiter was the man's long lost brother. The woman insists that everyone loved the singing and that the waiter roared with laughter. The man knows this is not true. There is a woman who had clam juice spilled down her back, who was supposedly fine with the accident. The man, who has sworn off drinking, decides that a medicinal dose is needed.

The woman relays that after the couple left the bar, there was a long taxi ride round and round the park. She asks if the man remembers it. He does not but lies to please her. The woman goes on to say that it was a magical ride and both had said things that they'd kept inside all this time. Wasn't it wonderful that the truth was out?

## Chapters 10-13 Analysis

The woman in A Telephone Call is symbolic of anyone who has ever waited for an important phone call. The character is obviously in love with the man who is either extremely important and busy or married. The man didn't have time to talk earlier in the day and the woman takes it to mean that she is no longer a part of his life. The woman berates herself for her behavior, knowing that men don't like argumentative or clingy women. The bargains with God fall through but the woman continues to make them while she waits for the call that doesn't come.

The woman in Here We Are seems to overreact at everything her new husband has to say on virtually every topic. The woman's actions and comments are completely irrational. The husband tries his best to appease her and only succeeds for a minute. The woman seems to want to pick a fight to avoid talking about their wedding night. When the husband tries to avoid the topic for his wife's sake, the wife is annoyed. Although there is a truce at the end of the story, the reader knows that the arguments will continue as soon as the couple gets off the train.

Like many of Parker's characters, Dusk Before Fireworks' Kit is somewhat unstable. One minute, the woman is starting a fight and the next minute she is apologizing and vowing to never argue again. Although Kit pretends to be unfazed by the number of women in Hobie's life, that fact is the basis of all the arguments. Hobie tries hard to convince Kit that she is the only woman that night, although the phone calls prove otherwise. When Kit leaves and Hobie arranges for another date, it is apparent that Hobie wasn't so hung up on her after all.



The comical scene in *You Were Perfectly Fine* leaves the reader amused and feeling somewhat sorry for the man who has no recollection of the night before. The woman who is tending to him tries hard to make light of the man's bad behavior and to console him. Throughout the story, the man discovers that he made a complete fool of himself during the evening, from singing too loud to flirting with a female friend. The woman turns every bad situation into one where the man comes off as the funny, talented and playful one.

The man becomes more distressed as the story goes on and he finally breaks his new vow to quit drinking. The liquor doesn't help however, when the man finds out that he and the woman had spent time together after the bar closed. In order to spare the woman's feelings, the man claimed to remember the taxi ride around the park. The man is trapped when the woman confesses that it was the best night of their lives and it was a relief that all of those feelings had finally come out. Naturally, the man has no idea what the woman is talking about and is filled with dread.



# Chapters 14-17

## Chapters 14-17 Summary

Mrs. Hofstadter on Josephine Street is the tale of a couple who have leased a cottage for the summer. The couple goes to an employment agency to find someone to tend to the house while the man works and the woman writes. The couple insists that the employee be a man since women tend to talk too much and the couple must have quiet. The lady at the agency recommends Horace, a man who has worked for Mrs. Hofstadter on Josephine Street on and off for many years. Horace is well loved by Mrs. Hofstadter and has a spotless record. The couple decides to hire Horace.

Horace arrives at the couple's cottage and immediately takes over. Horace always seems to be present and talking about himself and his family and friends. Horace never stops talking. Nearly every sentence revolves around Mrs. Hofstadter and how she would compliment Horace on virtually everything. The couple becomes frustrated very quickly. Horace talks constantly about the friends that will call once they know his whereabouts and lady friends will be present most of the time. The phone never rings and no one visits. Eventually, the couple can't stand it any more and Horace is fired.

Soldiers of the Republic revolves around a meal at a café in Valencia, Spain. There are several people involved, most notably a Swedish woman who is multilingual and spends most of the time translating remarks between diners. There are many soldiers at the café, from many different armies and regiments. It is obvious that many have not been home in a long time. Some of the soldiers tell stories about their year away from home. There has been no communication between the soldiers and their families. Some of the families have vanished and are feared to be captured or dead.

The diners admire the soldiers and the matter-of-fact way they talk about the war and being away from home.

Mr. and Mrs. Weldon have separated after seven years of marriage. Friends of the couple thought they were perfect together and are shocked. There are many questions asked and people wonder if there had been infidelity. The story switches over to the Wheldons at home. There is no animosity only formal and polite conversation. Neither seems to say what's on his mind and instead defers to the other. Outside of routine questions and generic answers, the Wheldons don't talk to each other. There is no anger or hard feelings in existence; it's simply that the couple has nothing to talk about.

The Last Tea tells of a man and a woman who meet for tea. The man is ill with a hangover and confesses that he has been out at night instead of working at the office. He tells the woman about a party he attended instead and talks about how wonderful one of the partygoers is, speaking of the woman's beauty. The woman at tea says she never thought the other girl as pretty although pleasant enough. The man cannot stop talking about her and soon the woman across the table begins telling tales about her



last date. The couple seems to try to outdo each other and there may be some unspoken attraction or jealousy. There is nothing resolved, however and the couple parts from the teahouse.

Hazel Morse is the main character in *Big Blonde*. Hazel is a model for some years before meeting Herbie Morse, the man who becomes her husband. Herbie is a fun man who likes to have a good time. Hazel feels the same way, always eager to be a good sport, never complains or expects too much. After the wedding, Hazel begins to change. Herbie's drinking, which has increased, is no longer amusing to Hazel. She loses the ability to become a good sport and begins to complain and cry at the slightest provocation. Herbie begins to refer to her as a nag and spends more time away from home. Even Hazel's willingness to partake in Herbie's nights out does nothing to soothe the relationship.

Herbie eventually leaves Hazel to accept a job in Detroit. Herbie has had enough. Hazel continues to play poker at the neighbor's house, which is where she meets Ed, a married businessman. Ed and Hazel begin a three-year affair, during which Ed pays Hazel an allowance and sees her only when his schedule permits. Eventually, Ed moves away but gives Hazel money on which to live.

During this time, Hazel's drinking gets much worse. Even before Herbie left, she'd started to drink alone but rationalized it away. Soon, Hazel seemed to live only for nights out and a bottle of scotch. After Ed, there were a number of men that Hazel couldn't even remember in order. In the end, Hazel always ended up alone with the bottle of scotch.

Everyone who knew Hazel tried to cheer her up but nothing worked. Hazel began sleeping most of the day, getting out of bed only to go out for the evening. A friend of Hazel's suggested that she tried a sleeping pill in order to feel rested and revived. Hazel took the advice, not to sleep but to commit suicide due to misery in the life she'd created.

Hazel took many pills and washed them down with scotch. Nettie, the maid, found Hazel unconscious the next day. Hazel survived the suicide attempt and ends the story by asking for a bottle of scotch.

## Chapters 14-17 Analysis

Mrs. Hofstadter on Josephine Street tells the story of Horace, a man who is considered a stellar houseman. The couple who hires him wants very little in the way of assistance, simply someone to keep people away, prepare meals, and keep the house clean. The couple covets peace and quiet.

It is apparent when Horace arrives at the cottage that he is not the right man for the job, despite the glowing recommendation from Mrs. Hofstadter. It becomes clear that there was a reason the couple was not permitted to see the written reference as it surely contained comments about Horace's non-stop talking and large amount of self-



importance. Horace commands attention at the cottage and talks constantly about his large circle of friends, both male and female, as well as every compliment he has ever received from Mrs. Hofstadter. At first, the couple tries to adjust but simply cannot. Horace gets fired.

Soldiers of the Republic gives the average citizen a glimpse into the hardships of being a soldier. The soldiers must be away from home for long periods of time and face unthinkable horrors while not knowing if their families are safe. The patrons of the café are impressed and saddened by the soldiers.

Mr. and Mrs. Wheldon are a happy couple overall who have grown so comfortable that they have lost the art of conversation. In place of small talk and sharing their lives, the couple is reduced to formality and the habit of being overly polite. It is amusing that their friends automatically assume there has been some great trouble or infidelity when the couple separates.

The Last Tea is a classic case of one-upmanship. The couple starts out chatting about the previous evening and as the conversation goes on, each person's night becomes more exciting and dramatic. One must wonder if the couple has some unspoken attraction to one another. Sadly, the couple parts and the reader is left to wonder.

Big Blonde is a classic tale of a woman who spirals downward into severe alcoholism. Many believe that this story is reflective of Parker's own life since she also suffered from depression and was an alcoholic.

Hazel is clearly an independent woman who is a people pleaser. She consistently hides her own thoughts and desires in deference to male companions since no man likes a spoilsport. Life was all about having fun and Hazel's mask allowed her to be a part of the crowd.

What once pleased Hazel about Herbie quickly falls by the wayside. Hazel is also relieved to be able to give up the façade of always being a good sport and goes in the opposite direction. Hazel becomes melancholy and the alcohol addiction becomes more pronounced.

Hazel's numerous affairs scream out the woman's need to be loved. Although Hazel finally recognizes that love and acceptance can't be obtained in a bottle, she cannot stop. Suicide seems to be the only answer. However, when suicide fails, the vicious cycle starts over again.



# Chapter 18

## Chapter 18 Summary

Sunset Gun is a series of short poems by Parker. The overall feeling is one of humor, quiet, and bright observation. There is a section of poems about other writers, including, Shelley, Keats, Byron, Dickens, Sand, Dumas, Wilde, and many more. The poems tend to fall into one of two categories, either that of praise or criticism. Parker thinks highly of Harriet Beecher Stowe but has little good to say about Alfred, Lord Tennyson, whom she finds monotonous. The poems segue into verses about other people but ones who are not famous, such as a merry maid.

There are poems that are more cheerful than usual, such as The Red Dress, in which Parker dreams of owning a red satin gown. Even the brightest poems contain an element of sadness although not regarding death.

## Chapter 18 Analysis

Sunset Gun shows the lighter side of Parker, which is never truly light. There are many observations about people one meets on the street to comments about contemporary writers of her time. There are some that Parker has met and socialized with, undoubtedly giving the author some insight into each person's personality.

Parker's view on relationships is poor and focuses mostly on those who would sabotage, hurt, or leave her. Obviously, there has been much suffering in Parker's romantic life as the men in the poems always betray the heroine. The quality of the verses is often sacrificed to make the point that diminishes Parker's talent. While the comments on the human race are often bleak, Parker openly admires many things about nature.





# Chapters 19-24

## Chapters 19-24 Summary

Just a Little One revolves around a speakeasy in 1928. The main characters, a man and a woman, attend the speakeasy and spend the evening drinking highballs made from true scotch. The woman is impressed that the man knows about the speakeasy and marvels at how easy it is to get in.

Strange conversations take place, from the man's annoying and tasteless significant other, Edith, to the woman making the man promise to contain her should she drink too much. After all, the woman may want to go out and adopt stray animals. Cats and dogs are fine but trying to put a horse into an elevator is a difficult task.

At the end of the story, both are drunk and are ready to go out and adopt stray animals - even a horse.

The main character in Lady with a Lamp, Mona, is sick with nerves and has spent ten days in bed, unable to get up and function. A friend comes to visit with the purpose of cheering Mona. Instead, the woman says all the wrong things and makes the situation much worse. The woman points out that no one is visiting or sending flowers; the woman's love is a cheater and good riddance to him. The woman goes on endlessly while Mona worsens. At the end of the story, the woman calls for Mona's servant saying that suddenly Mona has become upset.

In The Little Hours, the main character wakes up in the middle of the night and can't fall back to sleep. The others in the house are sleeping or passed out with no mind to their hostess' insomnia. The woman's mind is suddenly obsessed with French authors such as La Rochefoucauld, which seems an absurd thing to be obsessed with at four o'clock in the morning. Other thoughts come to mind, such as the need for a complete new set of friends and various proverbs. The woman tries to find a way to sleep but can't think of anything beyond counting sheep. The woman hates sheep. The French authors return and giving up on sleep, the woman turns on the light and settles in to read a book.

Miss Wilmarth is a well-trained nurse that happens to have an equine face. Nicknamed Horsie by her employers, the woman is steadfast and loyal and is oblivious to the comments made behind her back. The employers are the Crugers, Camilla and Gerald. Camilla has just had a child and needs time to recover so Miss Wilmarth is hired to help while Camilla is on bed rest.

The Crugers are pleasant to Miss Wilmarth's face and have no complaints about her performance. They are, however, completely unsettled by her appearance. Mr. Cruger complains because he must face Horsie over dinner every night and must resist offering her sugar lumps.





Guests are invited to the Cruger home and all gather in Camilla's bedroom for discussion. Talk turns to Miss Wilmarth, who Mr. Cruger refers to as Seabiscuit. Miss Wilmarth is in the nursery and hears the conversation. Still, Miss Wilmarth goes to dinner in a blue taffeta dress, stunning the guests. Eventually, Camilla is better and the couple is happy that they will no longer have to look at Horsie.

Glory in the Daytime tells the story of Mrs. Murdock, a woman who adores actors, actresses, and the theater. The biggest thrill in her life to date was when she was in New York and stood one foot away from the glamorous Billie Burke. Miss Noyes, one of Mrs. Murdock's bridge partners, knows an actress that Mrs. Murdock has worshipped since childhood. On a whim, Miss Noyes invites Mrs. Murdock to tea one afternoon and causally says that the actress Lily Wynton will also be joining them. Mrs. Murdock is beside herself with glee.

Mr. Murdock is a bitter man who does not share his wife's enthusiasm. Mr. Murdock has no interest in theater or bridge and detests Miss Noyes. Still, Mrs. Murdock can't resist telling him about Lily Wynton. Mr. Murdock is sarcastic and not impressed.

Mrs. Murdock arrives at Miss Noyes' for tea the following day and is thrilled when Lily arrives. The woman who had always seemed so glamorous is now worse for wear, her elegant clothing slightly stained and worn. The afternoon passes by with Lily gushing compliments while being so completely self-absorbed that she doesn't hear what the others are saying to her. Mrs. Murdock is still an admirer but realizes that Lily's life isn't as perfect as she thought.

New York to Detroit is the story of Jean and Jack, a couple who has been separated by Jack's job. The job has taken Jack from New York to Detroit where he has been for three weeks. Jean is desperate to talk to him and manages to get him on the phone.

The connection is horrible and Jack can't seem to hear anything Jean says. When Jean complies and talks louder, Jack asks why she is screaming into the phone. Jean repeats her pleas often but they fall on deaf ears. Jean continues to beg Jack to come home and his comments are simply that he can't hear anything over the bad connection and that she should write a letter. Jean finds out that Jack won't be coming back for sometime and is distraught. Jack ends the call with Jean still begging to talk to him.

## Chapters 19-24 Analysis

In Just a Little One, the main characters are a couple of friends who want to try out a new speakeasy for the evening. The man knows a place that is easy to get to and the pair settles in for an evening fueled with scotch. The woman continually questions the man's taste in Edith, a woman who she considers annoying and tasteless. Edith should not be buying the man's ties. The woman seems to be a little jealous, disguising it as good intentions. After three highballs the man and woman discuss a plan to save all the stray animals in the city even though they both live in apartments, which makes the plan ridiculous.



One must feel sorry for Mona in *Lady with a Lamp*. Mona has suffered a nervous break down and wants nothing more than to be alone to recover. An old friend visits and makes everything much worse. The friend probably doesn't mean to do it but seems to bring up all sorts of unpleasant topics that continually upset Mona to the point of collapse. The old friend readily gives advice although inappropriate. Being a good friend, it is her duty to inform Mona that her love is not out of town on business but rather is spending evenings out dancing with other women. At the end of the story, the friend is amazed at Mona's decline and tells the servant that something must have upset her.

*The Little Hours* is a humorous look at insomnia. The main character wakes up just after four o'clock in the morning and is doomed to stay awake no matter how hard she tries. Her thoughts race to various subjects, particularly French authors. Then the woman can't believe that she is thinking about French authors in the middle of the night. Her friends are thoughtless, being asleep while she is not and the woman decides that she needs new friends. Counting sheep is out because she hates sheep; yet there is nothing else to count. Finally, the woman gives up and begins to read.

Miss Wilmarth is Horsie, a capable baby nurse who is assigned to attend to Mrs. Camilla Cruger, who just gave birth to a baby girl. Camilla is on bed rest and must stay that way so someone is needed to care for the baby. Everyone notices that Miss Wilmarth looks quite a bit like a horse and the resemblance seems to overshadow everything else. The baby is well cared for, yet Mr. Cruger can say nothing to his wife except that he detests having to look at Horsie over dinner.

Although Horsie overhears the comments, she never wavers in her duty. Horsie is obviously an admirable woman and relieved to leave the Cruger home.

Mrs. Murdock is a theater buff and great fan of Lily Wynton, a stage actress. Mr. Murdock does not share his wife's enthusiasm and spends the evenings reading the financial page of the newspaper, grunting at his wife and spouting off sarcastic and caustic remarks. Mrs. Murdock tries to take it in stride but is suffering from having a husband who cannot share her joy.

When Mrs. Murdock learns that Lily Wynton will be joining her for tea at Miss Noyes' house, she is ecstatic. The perfect dress must be selected and conversation kept to a minimum so that she doesn't say anything foolish. Lily arrives, worse for wear. The actress' experience with men has been devastating, her stomach issues are horrible, and there are other complaints that cast a shadow over Mrs. Murdock's fantasy of the theater life. Still, meeting Lily is a thrill that Mrs. Murdock won't soon forget. On the way home, Mrs. Murdock realizes that perhaps she should be paying more attention to her husband and attempts to do so with no positive result.

Jack and Jean have an odd relationship. Jack has been sent to Detroit for work. Originally, Jack was to be away for five days but it has turned into three weeks. Jean is frantic without him and cannot stand the silence. Jack has not called as promised and has not written.

Jean finally calls Jack but is disappointed because Jack claims he cannot hear anything due to the bad phone connection. It seems clear to the reader that Jack hears a lot more than he lets on but simply does not want to deal with it or Jean.



# Chapter 25

## Chapter 25 Summary

Death and Taxes is a collection of short poems. The poetry in this section revolves around remorse and the frustration of being forced to live when one would rather die. There is a tale of caution in Ballade of Unfortunate Mammals when Parker warns that a man should be careful of making a partner out of a woman or an elephant because neither ever forgets.

Tombstones in Starlight is a collection of humorous verses similar to epitaphs. Parker speaks of many people one might see in the cemetery, including The Minor Poet, The Pretty Lady, The Very Rich Man, The Fisherwoman, The Crusader, and The Actress.

## Chapter 25 Analysis

Death and Taxes is another selection of poetry used to separate the short stories.

Parker continues to be obsessed with death and dying. Tombstones in Starlight is a lighthearted look at a group of unidentified people who have left their mark on the world in some way, even if it's only through a tombstone. This is a refreshing take on a topic that seems to permeate all of Parker's work.

Ballade of Unfortunate Mammals is also a humorous piece with a biting edge, reminding man that women and wild animals have a lot in common.



# Chapters 26-32

## Chapters 26-32 Summary

Custard Heart is the tale of Mrs. Lanier, a woman who is immersed in melancholia. Mrs. Lanier is an empathic woman who is so moved by the tragedy of the world that she must shut herself away to prevent any more heartbreak from entering her life. Mrs. Lanier is a private woman who laments that if she were to have a baby, she could almost be happy.

Mrs. Lanier's savior comes in the form of Gwennie, a maid. Gwennie attends to all of Mrs. Lanier's needs and keeps from her mistress things that may cause upset. If a servant is replaced, Gwennie handles it so Mrs. Lanier does not feel sad. Mrs. Lanier does require a new chauffeur, however, because the old chauffeur is old and bent. Mrs. Lanier is sad that the man has worked so long and so hard.

Kane, the new chauffeur, is very different from the other servants in that he is seen and heard. Kane is a good chauffeur and Mrs. Lanier is pleased. After a while, Kane isn't as available as the old chauffeur is and uses time off, something that many servants, including Gwennie, do not. Gwennie also begins to take time off which does not please Mrs. Lanier. One day Kane doesn't show up for work. Kane has vanished. Gwennie becomes ill with a cold and struggles to take care of Mrs. Lanier. One day, Mrs. Lanier teases Gwennie about getting fat. Gwennie walks in on Mrs. Lanier who is talking aloud about wanting to have a baby in order to be happy. Gwennie, who is pregnant, is shocked and nearly collapses.

Mr. Lanier appears little in the story and seems to avoid his wife and the sadness.

From the Diary of a New York Lady: During the Days of Horror, Despair and World Change is nothing more than five days' worth of ramblings from a shallow New York socialite as written in a diary. The woman tells of parties, dinners and the theater with everything written in superlatives. The theater is simply the most marvelous thing ever or the most horrendous thing she has ever seen; the breaking of a fingernail is the most horrible thing that has ever happened to her.

Cousin Larry details a conversation between two women, discussing the lives of Cousin Larry and Lila, his long-suffering wife. One of the women is not related to Larry but as a close friend has given him the nickname. The woman is tired of hearing everyone pity poor Lila who is a boring, insufferable selfish woman who complains to no end. Cousin Larry is fun and Lila is not. Lila resents that Larry has friends, likes to go out, laugh, and have fun. Lila likes none of these things.

The woman spends a great deal of time with Lila and Larry. She and Larry have great times, laughs, play music, and have inside jokes while Lila opts to go to bed. The



woman can't understand Lila's attitude and pities Larry while the rest of the world casts the pity on Lila, whose husband keeps company with another woman.

Little Curtis is a small boy adopted by Mr. and Mrs. Albert Matson, a wealthy family. The Matsons are nearly one and the same, living a life that is absolutely proper and socially acceptable with high standards tainted by snobbery. Mrs. Matson covets her social standing and frowns on people who are not as refined as she.

The goal of adopting Little Curtis was to have an heir to the family fortune since the Matsons have no intention of giving the family money to nieces and nephews who will squander it. Therefore, Little Curtis will be raised at the Matsons see fit, learning to be proper, associate with the right people, and behave in an acceptable manner. Curtis is berated early on for playing with another boy, simply because the boy is the son of a furnace man and is beneath the Matsons.

Mrs. Matson has a group of ladies over for tea and at the afternoon chooses to parade Curtis in front of them. Curtis is constantly prompted to say and do the right thing. When one of the ladies has a speaking tube knocked out of her hands, Curtis bursts into fits of laughter and is punished by horrified parents.

Sentiment is a short piece revolving around a woman who is depressed beyond repair. The woman is riding in a taxi, trying to run away from herself. The bright new red hat does nothing to cheer her and she assumes that nothing will ever cheer her again. Others tell the woman that she is too sentimental and must stop. The woman cannot stop and mourning the loss of her love makes her even more sentimental.

Clothe the Naked is the story of Big Lannie, a cleaner and laundress. Big Lannie has had a terrible life, losing her husband and several children. She is left with one child, Arlene, who is a wild girl with little regard to her mother. Arlene disappears for days at a time, and eventually stays away while Big Lannie waits for her at home. Arlene becomes pregnant and Big Lannie learns of it when she is called to the hospital. Arlene has a baby boy, instructs Big Lannie to name him Raymond, and then dies.

Big Lannie takes Raymond home. Because Raymond is blind, Big Lannie must take time off work to care for him. Money becomes scarce and Big Lannie must rely on odd jobs and the charity of the neighbors. Just when things get really bad, a former employer allows Big Lannie to come back to work two days a week. The job helps a great deal. Raymond is watched over by neighbors and spends his days weaving mats. Eventually, Raymond learns to go outside to take walks. It's hard for him to adjust but eventually, Raymond becomes adept at walking alone and enjoying the sunlight and friendliness of the neighbors.

A hard winter arrives and Big Lannie is beside herself. It is too cold to allow Raymond to go outside. Raymond has outgrown all of his clothes and Big Lannie can no longer repair fabrics that have been worn to the point of being threadbare. Swallowing her pride, Big Lannie goes to her employer and asks for a suit of clothes. The woman reluctantly gives Big Lannie the clothes and Raymond is able to go outside once more.



On a sunny spring day, Raymond returns to walking down the street. Something is different, however, and the laughter Raymond hears is not friendly. Raymond is jumped and returns home to never go outside again.

War Song is a short verse from a woman to her soldier who is fighting overseas. The woman gives the man permission to seek the company of another just as long as she doesn't know about it and the man promises to call the new woman by her name.

## Chapters 26-32 Analysis

Mrs. Lanier is obviously a woman who is so caught up in her own melancholia that she is unaware of the things that go on around her. There are always people tending to Mrs. Lanier and groups of people who come to the house with no other purpose than to try to cheer her up, which never seems to work.

Gwennie is a godsend to Mrs. Lanier because she handles everything for the mistress of the house. Mrs. Lanier could not survive without Gwennie and has become dependent on the maid to a ridiculous degree. Mrs. Lanier privately longs for a child but doesn't notice when Gwennie becomes pregnant. The story ends with Gwennie nearly fainting in shock when she finds out that Mrs. Lanier wants a baby.

From the Diary of a New York Lady: During the Days of Horror, Despair and World Change is an obvious glimpse into the shallow life of a New York socialite whose only goals are to attend the right parties and be seen at the appropriate venues. The woman becomes distressed over the slightest things, such as the wrong color fingernail polish. This tale leaves the reader thankful for a life of substance.

The woman in Cousin Larry is oblivious to her role in the misery of Larry's wife Lila. The woman claims to like Lila except that she is a whiner and general stick in the mud. The woman has nothing but high praise for Larry, who she adores. The woman spends a tremendous amount of time with Larry, dining at the couple's home and even accepting gifts from a man she refers to as her "Cousin". The woman has no idea that she is most likely the root cause of Lila's misery.

Little Curtis is an orphaned boy who has been adopted from a New York agency. The Matsons took into account that Curtis came from a good family and are determined to raise him a manner befitting an heir to the Matson and Whitmore fortunes. Curtis' life has become extremely strict, rigid, and formal. The boy is constantly berated for even the slightest display of inappropriate behavior. The Matsons parade Curtis around like a show pony. When Curtis collapses into laughter after the woman's speaking tube is dropped, the father goes with the boy upstairs for punishment while Mrs. Matson and her friend discuss how Curtis will have to learn to behave properly.

Sentiment is another tale that revolves around depression that overtakes a woman's life. The woman cannot bear to see people that look familiar in her state of woe. Nothing the woman does can ease the pain of losing a love that can no longer deal with her depression and sentimentality.



Big Lannie is a tale of giving and love. Big Lannie has managed to survive for many years despite numerous tragedies. When Raymond is born, Big Lannie puts everything aside to care for him, regardless of the consequences. Raymond is the only light in Big Lannie's life. The people who employed Big Lannie are mean and thoughtless in reference to the woman's hard work and personal situation. Big Lannie is forced to find a way to make ends meet while raising a blind child.

Big Lannie finds reluctant help in Mrs. Ewing, a former employer. The work will keep a roof over their heads and supply almost enough food. Mrs. Ewing also gives in and supplies a suit of clothes for Raymond. Despite all of the care everyone has given to Raymond, he is jumped in the street and returns home terrified. Raymond vows to never leave the safety of the apartment again.

War Song is a short verse from a woman to her man who is fighting overseas. The woman knows that the man is lonely and will not blame him for infidelity.





# Characters

## Dorothy Parker appears in None

Dorothy Parker 1893-1967 is considered one of the first feminists of the 1900s. Born in New Jersey as Dorothy Rothschild in 1893, Dorothy grew up in New York. Although she lived with a strict father and stepmother and was schooled in a convent, Dorothy took New York by storm at an early age. At age 16, Dorothy developed a business relationship with Vogue editor, Frank Crowninshield, who gave her an editorial position at the upscale magazine. Crowninshield was also a ranking officer at Vanity Fair and eventually hired Dorothy to be the magazine's drama critic. Vanity Fair also purchased Dorothy's first poem, "Any Porch", for a sum of \$12.

Dorothy married Edwin Pond Parker in 1917 and divorced the same year. Although Dorothy would later marry Alan Campbell to whom she would be married for more than thirty years, she decided to keep the name Parker. Perhaps this was a statement of practicality since many of her works were published under that name.

Parker is credited with a massive portfolio of stories and poems as well as articles and essays. Parker is credited with the first short story ever to appear in the New Yorker, which would continue to publish the author's work for nearly thirty years.

Parker's most famous allegiance, however, is tied to the Algonquin Roundtable. After being fired unfairly from Vanity Fair, Parker formed "Park-Bench" a writing partnership with writer Robert Benchley. While at Vanity Fair, Parker and Benchley began having luncheons at the Algonquin Hotel with fellow writers. The group quickly became famous due to its outspoken ideas and illustrious members, such as F. Scott Fitzgerald, Robert E. Sherwood, James Thurber, Ernest Hemingway, George S. Kaufman, and Franklin P. Adams. There were 24 members in all.

Dorothy Parker was also known for sharp criticisms and satire to which no one was immune. Unfortunately, Parker's fame dwindled with age and the writer's depression and alcoholism took its toll. Dorothy Parker died in 1967 at age seventy-three.

## Mrs. Mimi McVicker appears in The Lovely Leave

Mimi McVicker is the main character in The Lovely Leave. Mimi is married to a pilot who has been away for the past six months. During that time, Mimi obsesses over every wrong thing she has said or done and promises herself that the leave will be absolutely perfect. Mimi goes to a great deal of trouble to please her husband, Steve. Steve likes black dresses, so Mimi purchases a new one that is very expensive. Mimi ignores the price because she does not intend to ever pay the bill. A new nightgown is purchased and wrapped in fragrance in the bureau drawer. There are fresh flowers placed carefully around the apartment and the best food ready to be prepared.



When Steve arrives, Mimi is distressed to learn that the leave has been canceled and that Steve only has a short time to spend at home. Mimi immediately begins to wail and argue but Steve says there is nothing to be done. From that point forward, Mimi becomes a whirlwind of conflicted emotions and irrational behavior. Although Mimi had promised herself that the leave would be perfect, without argument, she causes one argument after another. Steve's desires to read the newspaper and to take a bath are perceived as slights toward Mimi and she says it's because he doesn't want to be with her. Steve works toward creating a pleasant evening and reconciling the situation. Mimi has moments of melancholy as well as being repentant for her behavior.

Steve leaves with Mimi still complaining about the canceled leave. Although the leave had appeared to be miserable, Mimi reports to a friend that it was lovely.

## **Mr. Durant appears in Mr. Durant**

Mr. Durant is an assistant manager at a rubber company. Although Durant is forty-nine-years-old and married, he has an affair with a young stenographer.

## **Annabel appears in The Standard of Living**

Annabel is a stenographer who invented the game of pretending to spend a million dollars on oneself.

## **Hobie appears in Dusk Before Fireworks**

Hobie is a young man sought after by many women and has a difficult time keeping them separate. It is not clear if Hobie is simply attractive or is a sexual release for a long list of clients.

## **Mrs. Martindale appears in Song of the Shirt, 1941**

Mrs. Martindale is a well-to-do, compassionate woman who puts aside her own ambitions and desires to volunteer for soldiers in the war.

## **Walter Williams appears in Arrangement in Black and White**

Walter Williams is a black musician who is the guest of honor at a dinner party in Arrangement in Black and White.



## **Rose appears in Mr. Durant**

Rose is the twenty-year-old stenographer who has an affair with Mr. Durant.

## **Hazel Morse appears in Big Blonde**

Hazel Morse is the main character in Big Blonde. Hazel is a thirty-something woman who is prone to severe depression and alcoholism.

## **Miss Wilmarth appears in Horsie**

Miss Wilmarth is a well-trained baby nurse who accompanies Camilla Cruger home from the hospital.



## Objects/Places

### The Bains Home appears in The Wonderful Old Gentleman

The Bains home is owned by Allie and Lewis Bains. Residents also include Allie's father, the Wonderful Old Gentleman, and Miss Chester, a boarder. The house has drastically changed since the arrival of the father five years earlier. Parker refers to the living room as a chamber of horrors modified for family use.

The living room is high-ceilinged and contains dark heavy wood, which matches the cumbersome furniture. The walls are mustard yellow, once decorated with gold but now faded to a miserable state. The furniture creaks and the tapestry smells musty and old. No matter how Mrs. Bain tries, gray dust gathers in the crevices of the sofa.

There is a center table in the room that has three female nudes with outstretched arms that serve as a base. The table complements the great mantelpiece that is also ornately adorned with a curly headed boy. There are many decorations throughout the room, not many of them Mrs. Bains' choosing or taste. The walls contain a wide variety of art, from religious to modern. There are bric-a-brac and sculptures throughout the room and the overall feel is lovely but one of oppression. This feeling is only added to by the presence of Mrs. Whittaker, Mrs. Bains' sister.

### Mr. Durant's Office appears in Mr. Durant

Mr. Durant works as an assistant manager in the credit department of a rubber company. Although Durant is an assistant, his office is located on the same floor as the managers and other officers of the company. The office contains a secretary belonging to Durant's boss as well as the boss' office. Durant is considered an officer of the company and therefore has an office with a telephone and a desk. The office is not elaborate but suits Mr. Durant. The small office had most everything Mr. Durant needed except for a stenographer. If Durant wished to dictate a letter or other important correspondence, he had two choices. Durant could approach his boss' secretary who would gladly do the job but was always busy. The second choice involved calling around to other offices to inquire about a stenographer that might be available. This is how Durant met Rose.

Rose came to the office to take a letter for Durant. Durant was not impressed with the young girl in cheap clothing but still found something attractive about her all the same. Rose was often available to take on Durant's extra work and soon, Rose was the only person Durant would ever request.

The two began an affair in Durant's office, often staying late at night pretending to work. Durant was amazed that no one ever thought to check in on him or on the nights when



he turned out the lights, that no one had rattled the doorknob. The office is also where the affair ended. Rose became pregnant and with the help of a co-worker, an abortion was arranged for Rose. Rose left the company, vowing to never return.

## **Outdoor cafe in Valencia appears in Soldiers of the Republic**

The outdoor cafe in Valencia, Spain is the site where the characters meet the soldiers who have returned home after a year of fighting in the war.

## **Hobie's apartment appears in Dusk Before Fireworks**

Hobie's apartment is the site of Dusk Before Fireworks. Kit, Hobie's date, is jealous because the apartment has been decorated by all the women in Hobie's life and seems to be the spot where many women spend their evenings.

## **Train appears in Here We Are**

The newlyweds in Here We Are spend the entire story on the train on their way to New York where they will spend the honeymoon.

## **Grave appears in Poems**

Dorothy Parker is fascinated with death and dying and often portrays the grave as a place from which she can watch the world as people are forced to live in misery.

## **Bridge Club appears in Glory in the Daytime**

The Bridge Club is the social gathering place of Mrs. Murdock and friends.

## **Fifth Avenue Jewelry Store appears in Standard of Living**

The Fifth Avenue jewelry store is the place where Annabel and Midge price the pearls and realize that they will never be able to afford the necklace in real life.



## **Josephine Street appears in Mrs. Hofstadter on Josephine Street**

Josephine Street is a grand residential area where Mrs. Hofstadter, Horace's former employer, lives.

## **Dinner Party appears in Agreement in Black and White**

The dinner party was held in honor of black musician Walter Williams and is the place where Williams meets the woman who professes not to be a bigot.



# Themes

## Death

Dorothy Parker is well-known for being completely obsessed with death, in both her writing and personal life. It is not clear what exactly fascinates Parker about death and dying because it takes on many forms. There are tales of those who have died and are looking back at those she has left behind with a sense of relief or remorse. There are many poems that express such a great misery at the state of Parker's life, or the life of the character, that death would be a welcome release. However, when death does not come, Parker and the character both seem to be angry, frustrated, or simply resigned.

It is known that Parker suffered from alcoholism and depression, as revealed in *Big Blonde*. One cannot help but see Hazel Morse as a thinly veiled version of Parker, unstable, suffering from loss of love, and slavery to a bottle of scotch.

Parker lived to be seventy-three years old and died of natural causes. Because Parker's career had peaked many years before, the one thing that had sustained her seemed to have fallen by the wayside. Parker leaves behind a great legacy consisting of poetry, short stories, reviews, articles, and essays. Today's reader can only guess at what Parker was thinking in the most prolific years and refer to the work as a guide.

## Mental Instability

A great number of Parker's characters are mentally unstable in some way. The characters are usually women who cannot seem to control their anger, jealousy, or depression. A common theme is a conversation between a woman and a man. The conversation may be going well until the woman reads something into the man's innocent comment and starts a fight; or the woman is simply mad about something and behaves in a cycle of being completely erratic and then remorseful.

There are also situations where the woman's instability is caused by a lack of appropriate information. Many of the characters also employ the use of masks in order to hide true thoughts and feelings in front a potential beau or husband, thinking that the men want no part of a woman who isn't a "good sport". The problem arrives when the woman either chooses to give up the mask due to exhaustion or is finally overwrought and emotions gush forth like water from a dam that has burst.

Regardless of the reason, Parker seems to enjoy writing about these erratic women and the response they receive from those around them. The result is usually that the women end up being falsely pacified or left alone.



## Infidelity

The theme of infidelity runs deep in Parker's stories and poems. There are always lovers who stray or leave the other person, usually causing a severe depression sometimes followed by anger, remorse, or thoughts of revenge.

One must wonder if Parker was betrayed or had betrayed either of her husbands and how those infidelities helped to shape the work.

There are also references to a type of innocent infidelity in the relationships that are formed between men and women who do not take it to a sexual level. A good example of this is found in *Cousin Larry* where the main character is obviously taken with Larry to such a degree that she constantly intrudes on Larry's life with Lila, although she is doing it under the guise of friendship. Lila's reactions are understandable, yet the woman sees herself as being a release for her good friend Larry. Subconsciously, the woman wants to be in Lila's place.

Fear of infidelity is also apparent in several stories and poems, coming to light in the form of mistrust and erratic behavior. Often the women suffer from this affliction and lack the coping mechanisms to deal with the situation. Rather than deal with the fear or problem at hand, the women tend to become depressed or turn to alcohol. The women continue to isolate and embrace melancholy to the point of being overtaken by it.





# Style

## Point of View

Dorothy Parker tends to write short stories in a third person point of view. With rich character and setting descriptions, the reader is able to get a good sense of the story as a whole since the third person allows the reader to have the whole story encapsulated in an objective view rather than through the eyes of a specific character. This point of view is particularly effective in stories such as *The Wonderful Old Gentleman*, which relies heavily on description of the Bains home and the character of the sisters. Although it would be tempting to write the story from the point of view of Mrs. Bains, who is clearly the most affected character, Parker chooses to let the reader observe and decide for himself the characters' place and behavior as the story expands.

The poetry is written with a combination of the first and third person points of view. In poetry, many prefer a first person point of view because it tends to convey more emotion. The third person point of view works well when Parker speaks of other people and situations that are removed from her sphere of understanding. The third person point of view in this area helps to guide the reader through Parker's prose.

Readers may become slightly confused by the stories that are written in third person but contain dialogue that is structured to represent the first person. This is especially apparent in *Cousin Larry* and *The Lady with the Lamp*, where one character dominates the story.

## Setting

Parker's settings vary from house to café to bar yet manage to maintain the same feeling. Most of the stories take place in New York, which was Parker's hometown. Those that take place elsewhere still have a New York flavor in the way people speak and behave. The New York in Parker's work is, for the most part, the city of social standards and big desires. Even when the character is faced with a difficult time, the glamour of New York holds the promise that things can get better.

In *Diary of a New York Lady*, readers get a good glimpse into the New York social scene of the 1920s and 1930s. There is much talk about theater, the speakeasy, restaurants, and parties, which gives a true sense of placement and nostalgia.

In *Soldiers of the Republic*, Parker completely changes the setting by placing the characters in an outdoor café in Valencia, Spain. The café is filled with a combination of soldiers and travelers from all over the world. The placement of the multi-lingual Swedish woman at the café is beneficial in that it helps strangers converse in their native languages. The description of the soldiers' home lives, previous or current, is telling in regards to the nature of war.



## Language and Meaning

Dorothy Parker tends to use language that is reflective of the times. Characters are likely to use vocabulary and phrases that are native to their social status as well as a specific generation. In *Diary of a New York Lady*, the main character speaks in superlatives that would most likely be used by a woman in her early twenties. In *Little Curtis*, Mrs. Matson is the epitome of old money in New York and the language, which is extremely precise and proper, reflects that fact.

Parker's writing tends to be rather crisp at all times. There are times when it may seem overly formal but in general, Parker's words paint very nice pictures.

There is rarely a communication barrier between characters, regardless of class and culture. There are subtle differences but the message always gets across. This is best illustrated in *Soldiers of the Republic*, where the Swedish woman takes the lead and bridges the language barrier between the soldiers and travelers.

There are several poems, particularly those that are written about other writers such as Alexandre Dumas, which use a precise style of language to reflect that of the subject.

## Structure

The *Portable Dorothy Parker* was designed by Parker in 1944, collecting a large number of short stories and poems that made her famous. There are many other aspects to Parker's career, which were later compiled to give an overall view of Parker's work.

The book is 370 pages in length and separated into various sections, although they are unmarked. The book starts with eight short stories. The stories have seventy pages, with most pages falling into the 3-4 page range, although the average page length is eight pages.

The second section is the first selection of poetry. This section, *Enough Rope*, is 44 pages in length, with an average poem containing three verses.

The following section of short stories contains nine stories with an average page length of nine pages.

The next poetry section is *Sunset Gun*, which is 29 pages in length and follows the format of the previous section.

A series of six short stories follows, with an average length of eight pages.

*Death and Taxes* is a section of poetry that is 23 pages in length, in the same format as previous sections.

The last seven short stories contain an average page count of six pages per story.

The final poem, War Song, is a freestanding short poem of three verses.



## Quotes

If you looked for things to make you feel hurt and wretched and unnecessary, you were certain to find them, and more easily each time, so easily, soon, that you did not even realize you had gone out searching.

The Lovely Leave, Pg. 3

"I haven't the slightest feeling about colored people. Why, I'm just crazy about some of them. They're just like children - just as easygoing, and always singing and laughing and everything."

Arrangement in Black and White, Pg. 20

Always the girls went to walk on Fifth Avenue on their free afternoons, for it was ideal ground for their favorite game.

The Standard of Living, Pg. 30

It did not occur to him to feel even a flicker of astonishment that Rose should have responded so eagerly to him, an immovably married man of forty-nine.

Mr. Durant, Pg. 37

Innocence is a desirable thing, a dainty thing, an appealing thing in its place; but carried too far, it is merely ridiculous.

Mr. Durant, Pg. 39

What can you say, when a man asks you to dance with him? I will most certainly not dance with you, I'll see you in hell first.

The Waltz, Pgs. 47-48

There was no need for them to gather at the Old Gentleman's bedside. He would not have known any of them. In fact, he had not known them for almost a year, addressing them by wrong names and asking them grave, courteous questions about the health of husbands or wives or children who belonged to other branches of the family.

The Wonderful Old Gentleman, Pg. 55

The exceptional brightness must have had its effect on unseen objects, too, for Mrs. Martindale, as she paused to look up the Avenue, seemed actually to feel her heart grow bigger than ever within her.

Song of the Shirt, 1941, Pg. 65

Oh, let it be a night of lyric rain and singing breezes when my bell is tolled.

Testament, Pg. 92



If I didn't think about it, maybe the telephone might ring. Sometimes it does that.  
A Telephone Call, Pg. 119

He spoke to us. As if coated with grease, words slid from his great lips, and his tones were those of one who cozens the sick.  
Mrs. Hofstadter on Josephine Street, Pg. 158

She liked to think of herself as one for whom flowers would thrive, who must always have blossoms around her if she would be truly happy.  
Too Bad, Pg. 172

There was no settled shocked moment when she first thought of killing herself; it seemed to her as if the idea had always been with her.  
Big Blonde, Pg. 201

The first thing I've got to do is to get out and whip me up a complete new set of dearest friends; that's the first thing. Everything else can wait.  
The Little Hours, Pg. 256

The most terrible thing happened just this minute. Broke one of my fingernails right off short. Absolutely the most horrible thing I ever had happen to me in my life.  
From the Diary of a New York Lady, Pg. 329

It's sentimental to know that you cannot bear to see the places where once all was well with you, that you cannot bear reminders of a dead loveliness.  
Sentiment, Pg. 357

## Topics for Discussion

Why do you think Parker's female characters tend to be irrational and borderline manic? Explain.

In light of the portrayal of the female characters in the stories, do you think that Parker hates women? Explain.

How might the poetry of Dorothy Parker have influenced her short stories?

What alternatives could the Wheldons have employed beside separation?

Much of Parker's poetry revolves around death. What are the reasons the author was convinced that death was preferable to life? Would this have changed as she got old?

Parker often creates characters who act falsely to please others. Is this a sign of the times or due to the societal belief that women must behave a certain way as to keep a man?

How might the adulterous affairs in the short stories relate to Parker's life?

How might the New York Lady have coped with a true tragedy?

Choose two characters from the book and compare them to characters in modern literature.