

A Reliable Wife Study Guide

A Reliable Wife by Robert Goolrick

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Plot Summary

This novel of sexual intrigue, betrayal, and redemption concerns the experiences of two principal characters, Ralph Truitt and Catherine Land, who at first appear to be very different but are ultimately quite similar. As the narrative gradually peels back the many layers of secrets and sufferings in the lives of each of these deeply troubled characters, it also explores themes related to the power of sexual desire, the unpredictable nature of humanity, and the dangers of isolation.

The narrative begins with businessman Ralph Truitt waiting, alone and cold on a wintry train platform, for his mail order bride to arrive. At the same time, that bride, Catherine Land, contemplates the challenge ahead of her: to suppress her own extravagant personality and desires in order to be the kind of demure "reliable" wife Truitt believes her to be. When she steps off the train, Truitt is surprised to see that she does not look like her picture and accuses her of lying. When she says she can explain, he says he does not want to hear it, and drives her home, planning to send her back in a couple of days. Just short of his house, an accident with the horses leaves him injured. With the help of a pair of servants, Catherine gets him inside and starts nursing him back to health.

As Truitt is getting his strength back, he tells Catherine his life story. He discusses his ambitious father, religious and ruthless mother, his adolescence of sexual debauchery, a sudden love for a penniless Italian aristocrat that ended in marriage, his return home upon the death of his father, taking over of the family business, and becoming a father to a girl who became mentally disabled following a childhood illness. He also describes how his wife took a lover and subsequently had a son with a lover and how he threw them out, while keeping the son whom he raised along with his daughter. His daughter however died and then his son Antonio eventually left. Catherine absorbs everything that he tells her and continues to pursue their relationship, aware the whole time of her plan to kill him and inherit his money. Eventually, Catherine and Truitt are married.

A few months after the wedding, Truitt sends Catherine to St. Louis to bring back Antonio since a pair of private detectives has found him. The first attempt fails, but when Catherine visits Antonio alone, the two immediately give in to their lust for each other and indulge in a passionate affair. Catherine reveals her plan to kill Truitt and Antonio urges her to do it quickly so they can share in the inherited money.

When Catherine returns home, she puts her plan into action, slipping small amounts of arsenic into Truitt's food and water. While Truitt is aware of what she's doing, he's also aware that he's fallen in love with her and that his despair at not getting Antonio back is so strong that he doesn't want to live. Catherine finds herself becoming fonder of Truitt, when she suddenly realizes she can't follow through on her plan and stops administering the poison. She nurses Truitt back to health, even while she summons Antonio to his bedside. Antonio comes, immediately starts taking advantage of his father's money, constantly argues with the steadily recovering Truitt, and repeatedly hints that Catherine has got to follow through on their plan. When her repeated refusals



become too much for him, he rapes her, determined to force her into doing his will. Truitt catches him and, after Antonio reveals the past that he and Catherine shared, beats him. Their fight ends abruptly when Antonio, who has unwittingly fled onto a shallowly iced lake, falls through and drowns.

In the aftermath of Antonio's revelation and death, the now pregnant Catherine wonders what is going to become of her. Truitt confesses that he already knew about what happened in St. Louis and that it does not matter any more to him. Catherine tells him that she is going to have a baby and the two of them walk back into their home.



Part 1 - Wisconsin, Fall, 1907 - Chapters 1 and 2

Part 1 - Wisconsin, Fall, 1907 - Chapters 1 and 2 Summary

This novel of sexual intrigue, betrayal, and redemption is built around the experiences of two characters, Ralph Truitt and Catherine Land, who at first appear to be very different but are ultimately quite similar. As the narrative gradually peels back the many layers of secrets and sufferings in the lives of each of these deeply troubled characters, it also explores themes related to the power of sexual desire, the unpredictable nature of humanity, and the dangers of isolation.

Chapter 1: On a cold winter night in Wisconsin, with a blizzard looming, wealthy businessman Ralph Truitt waits on the platform of the train station for the train that is carrying his mail order bride. Ralph is aware that the townspeople also on the platform are only there to see his bride and that those people both despise him for his loneliness and need him for the jobs he provides for almost everyone in the town and is determined to not display any weakness. Ralph lost his wife, children, and many of his dreams twenty years before, and that he has striven hard to maintain an appearance of strength and consistency. While preparing to come to the station, Ralph studied his face in the mirror and realized that his appearance probably fooled no one since his desperation, need, loneliness, and the emotional barrenness of the last twenty years have taken their toll on his face. He is also described as being obsessed with sex and intimacy and with the vulnerability, the warmth of connection, the joy and the pleasure in both. He recalls the letter written to him by his bride, in which she included a photograph, which shows her to be quite plain and described herself as not looking for love but a home. Ralph agreed to her coming and even after waiting a long time and with the train being late, he feels he can wait a little longer.

Chapter 2: Catherine sits alone in the expensive compartment that Ralph had booked for her journey. Much as Ralph had stared into the mirror that morning, she too looks at herself in the mirror, recognizing her beauty, recalling how in the past it had brought her attention and a degree of happiness. She recalls a memory of traveling with her beautiful mother in the company of several attractive young men, her mother's death during the birth of her younger sister, and her eventual realization that she could not live without either love or money. After the porter tells her the train will be arriving in half an hour, she takes off her expensive clothes and throws them out a window. She then sews her jewelry into the hem of one of the plain black dresses she has brought with her, describing how she saw Ralph's advertisement seeking "a reliable wife" and decided because of her needs for love and money, to suppress her true self and become the sort of woman that he wanted. She puts on her plain dress, changes her hairstyle into



something more severe, puts her memories aside, and when the train stops, steps out to meet Ralph for the first time.

Part 1 - Wisconsin, Fall, 1907 - Chapters 1 and 2 Analysis

These first two chapters introduce the book's two central characters, each of whom is both a protagonist or a central character who undergoes a significant personal change and/or who drives the action and an antagonist or a character whose desires oppose those of the protagonist and whose actions trigger the protagonist's transformation. In other words, the foundations and motivations of complicated relationship between Truitt and Catherine, as well as their individually complicated relationships with themselves, are laid down here, their clearly opposite intentions and perspectives on the situation setting the stage for the conflict to follow. These portrayals of characters with obvious potential for conflict, both within themselves and with each other, function effectively to draw the reader into the narrative. At the same time, there are suggestions even here of the fact, explored in detail in the narrative to follow, that ultimately, their purposes and their identities are, after all, not that different.

Other important elements in this section include the reference to the weather in Chapter 1 and several instances of foreshadowing. These include the reference to Truitt's family life, which foreshadows the stories he tells about his family and the eventual intrusion of Antonio into the lives of both characters. There is also the reference to Catherine's family, which foreshadows the appearance of her sister Alice later in the narrative. Finally, there is the comment at the end of the chapter that Catherine knows more of what is to happen than Truitt. This foreshadows the eventual revelation that she is planning to poison him, a revelation hinted at with the first appearance of the blue glass bottle, the first reference to poison and the beginning of her planned attempt to administer that poison.



Part 1 - Wisconsin, Fall, 1907 - Chapters 3 and 4

Part 1 - Wisconsin, Fall, 1907 - Chapters 3 and 4 Summary

Chapter 3: When Catherine gets off the train, she recognizes Truitt easily, noting his apparent richness and loneliness. She introduces herself, and the surprised Truitt confronts her about the fact that face is not that of the woman in the photograph. She says it's a photo of her cousin India and offers to explain, but aware that they are being watched, Truitt takes her and her things out to where his carriage is waiting, commenting that he is fully aware their relationship is beginning with a lie. As they drive out into the country, Catherine becomes uncomfortably aware of how isolated she is, recalling the happiness and fun of the city. For his part, Truitt plans to get rid of Catherine in a couple of days. When a deer suddenly darts in front of the carriage, the horses are startled and bolt. Catherine hangs on desperately as Truitt, equally desperate, tries to get the horses under control but is eventually thrown off, his head colliding with a wheel. Catherine takes the reins, letting the horses go where they will. At one point, the hem of her dress tears. She and the horses end up on a frozen river, where the horses stop and Catherine is able to calm them down, leading them back up to the road. There they find a wounded Truitt who, in spite of his apparent reluctance to let Catherine touch him, allows himself to be helped into the carriage. He tells Catherine the horses know their way home, and then collapses.

Chapter 4: When they arrive at Truitt's house, Catherine is surprised to see that it seems both well-kept and welcoming. The servants, Mr. and Mrs. Larsen, rush out and help as they arrive, realizing that one of the horses has a broken leg. When Truitt is carried inside, Catherine asks for her case and, when it arrives, uses her needle and thread to sew closed the wound in his head, lying and saying that she learned to do it by watching her doctor father. Meanwhile, she realizes that the jewelry has fallen out of her torn hem, the wounded horse is shot, and Truitt falls into unconsciousness. After Catherine is finished, Mr. and Mrs. Larsen take Truitt upstairs, leaving Catherine alone. She looks around herself for the first time and realizes that the home's furnishings, while mostly rustic, are in a few cases also very expensive. As Larsen continues to walk Truitt to keep him from again falling unconscious, Mrs. Larsen gives Catherine some of the very well-cooked dinner she has prepared, later showing her to her bedroom. Catherine takes off her blood-soaked dress and unpacks her belongings, narration noting how she pays particular attention to a small blue bottle. As she prepares for bed, she comes to an uncomfortable realization that her life has suddenly become both more real than, and exactly the opposite of everything her fantasies ever were, and what her schemes had led her into. She is just settling into bed when Mrs. Larsen comes and tells her that Truitt has a fever.



Part 1 - Wisconsin, Fall, 1907 - Chapters 3 and 4 Analysis

The confrontation between Catherine and Truitt over the falseness of her identity can be seen as the introduction of an important motif or repeated image of Catherine's practice of lying to Truitt and his reactions to the truth. This complicated tension between what Catherine wants Truitt to believe, what he wants to believe, and what he accepts and understands continues throughout the narrative, with Catherine's change in attitude towards lying and Truitt's expansion of what he can accept and understand becoming key elements of their journey of transformation. Meanwhile, the reference to Catherine's sense of isolation is a reiteration of a similar sense experienced by Truitt in Chapter 1, with both references serving as manifestations of the narrative's thematic interest in both the image and the effects of isolation. Then there is the reference to the loss of Catherine's jewelry, which functions on two levels. In the first, the loss of the jewels can be seen as a symbolic reiteration of the isolation she is experiencing (i.e. with the jewelry lost, she has no means of paying her way out of that isolation). On a second level, the reference is a foreshadowing of the jewelry eventually being found in the spring, and of her discovery that she no longer longs for the freedom that the jewelry once represented.

Other important elements in this section include Catherine and Truitt's encounter with the deer, a symbolic foreshadowing of the wildness that each of them encounters in themselves over the course of the narrative; Catherine's reference to her cousin India, which foreshadows India's appearance in Chapter 20; and the reference to the blue glass bottle, which is another foreshadowing of her plan to poison Truitt and her putting that plan into action.



Part 1 - Wisconsin, Fall, 1907 - Chapters 5 and 6

Part 1 - Wisconsin, Fall, 1907 - Chapters 5 and 6 Summary

Chapter 5: Truitt is aware of the women, Mrs. Larsen and Catherine, tending to him during his illness. In language that evokes a feverish state of delirium, Truitt's recollections of his past includes his powerful businessman father, his quiet brother who died at nineteen and, most particularly, of his religiously domineering mother. She, tortured him with painful visions of hell and taunting comments about his unredeemable wickedness, which hurt particularly because he knew she was right, having been tormented by lustful thoughts about women ever since he was a child. The author then gives a history of Truitt's past including his attendance first at boarding school and then college, where he lived a life full of booze and women, funded entirely by regularly received money from his father, who also funded a post-college tour of Europe. While in France, he became even more decadent, indulging in drinking, drugs, and prostitutes, desiring them desperately but hating himself, with equal desperation, for acting on that desire. All that ended when he saw and fell in love with Emilia, a beautiful Italian girl from a poor but aristocratic family. He courted both her and her parents, arranging for his father to give him a lot of money to seal the marriage deal. As plans for the wedding continued, Truitt's father fell ill and died. The wedding took place almost immediately and Truitt and Emilia set sail for America, Truitt confessing the dark desperation of his sexual desires and Emilia telling him to not be foolish, but not really knowing what she was saying. When Truitt arrived back home to take control of his father's business, the out-of-place Emilia was already pregnant. Narration describes how everyone in Truitt's family was now dead, how he hoped his lust would fade but never did, and how it transformed into an angry solitude. Narration then returns to the present, with a description of how the two women continued to take care of him throughout his illness.

Chapter 6: Catherine waits, bored almost out of her mind, for Truitt's health to improve. She recalls her decadent past with lovers, drugs, and a great deal of traveling. She eats the wonderful food prepared for her by Mrs. Larsen, who tells her that she's glad to have the chance to cook again, having done it last in "the other house." When Catherine asks about that house, Mrs. Larsen stays quiet but at one point, tells Catherine that Truitt has been hurt very badly in the past, and that if she, Catherine, hurts him, Mrs. Truitt will hurt her. Catherine promises that she will not, but the author reveals her plan to marry Truitt, get her hands on his money, and leave with a young lover. Narration also describes how she frequently contemplates the blue glass bottle and how easy it was for her to learn how to make poison. Meanwhile, she continues her devoted nursing, which eventually results in Truitt's fever breaking. "



Part 1 - Wisconsin, Fall, 1907 - Chapters 5 and 6 Analysis

There are several important elements in this section. The first is the detailed description of Truitt's past, which offers the reader further indications of the deeply troubled soul that lies beneath the surface of his sharp bitterness and, simultaneously, begins the process of establishing some of the essential similarities and/or parallels between his experience and that of Catherine, itself hinted at in Chapter 6. One of the most important aspects of Truitt's past, meanwhile, is his relationship with his sadistic mother who, as the narration points out at one point, stuck his palm deeply with a pin to demonstrate the pain that would be awaiting for him in hell if he continued on his path. The scar left behind by that pin remains in Truitt's hand, a physical representation of the emotional, spiritual, and moral scar her judgment left behind. Is there an echo here of the piercing of Christ's hands with nails during his crucifixion? Some might say that's going too far, but others might suggest that those nails are symbolic of Christ's taking on exactly the sort of human sin that Truitt's mother is talking about.

Other than the previously discussed reference to Catherine's past, other important elements in Chapter 6 include Mrs. Larsen's reference to the other house and also her comments about Truitt's inner wounds. These foreshadow, his description, in the following section, of how those wounds came about. Then there is the reference to the blue glass bottle, with its increasingly clear, increasingly specific, and increasingly suspenseful link to poison for the first time, a linkage that is not yet entirely overt, but is pretty close to being so.

Finally, at the end of Chapter 6, there is one of the earliest occurrences in the novel of the phrase "It happens". The phrase is a motif, repeated frequently, albeit with variations, throughout the narrative. On each occurrence, it essentially suggests that while events may come as a surprise to the individuals involved, they're not out of character for humanity as a whole.



Part 1 - Wisconsin, Fall, 1907 - Chapters 7, 8 and 9

Part 1 - Wisconsin, Fall, 1907 - Chapters 7, 8 and 9 Summary

Chapter 7: One day, Truitt tells Catherine the story of his life - his indulgent, busy father, his relationship with his mother, his constant lustful desires, of his young adulthood, of his meeting Emilia. He then tells her how, while Emilia was pregnant, he had a house built for her with material shipped from Italy, how part of the house included a secret Italian garden, how she moved in shortly after their daughter (Francesca) was born, and how she insisted on sleeping in a separate bedroom. He describes how he had a piano teacher brought from Italy, how the teacher and Emilia had a long affair, how Francesca became ill with influenza (survived, but was brain damaged), and how Emilia gave birth to another child, Antonio. Eventually, he says, he caught the piano teacher and Emilia together. He beat the teacher almost to death, threw both him and Emilia out of the house, and moved back to his family's house, his mother leaving immediately and never returning. Francesca eventually died, while Truitt's hatred for Antonio, who looked just like Emilia, grew and Antonio's for him did the same. Eventually, Truitt says, Antonio left home after Truitt told him Emilia had been killed in a fire - she did die eventually, Truitt says, but hadn't at that time. Over the years, Truitt adds, he's realized that he behaved very badly, but now wants Antonio back since he's all he's got left. He confesses that recently, he had set detectives looking for Antonio, and that they believe he's been found - playing piano in a whorehouse in St. Louis. He then says that he told Catherine everything he did because he believes it's important she know everything about his life, as they're to be married, even if she did send a picture of someone else. Catherine, who had said earlier that she wanted to avoid being judged by her beauty, confesses that she doesn't love him. He says he doesn't expect it, but adds that he does expect her to go to St. Louis and bring Antonio to him.

Chapter 8: As the days pass, Truitt's thoughts become more and more lustful, imagining all the things he wants to do to Catherine and the things he wants her to do to him. But he says nothing, expressing his desire in gifts and trinkets that she accepts without knowing the desire they represent. Meanwhile, plans are made for a wedding, Truitt telling Catherine she can have whatever she likes. Meanwhile, he continues to recall his past sexual adventures, becoming sexually aroused when Catherine expresses interest in his thoughts. The chapter concludes with a reference to how Truitt lies in bed, wondering whether Catherine sleeping in a room down the hall, is thinking of him while he's thinking of her. Catherine, meanwhile, constantly imagines herself smoking, which is a habit she has given up since she arrived at Truitt's home.

Chapter 9: Truitt gives Catherine everything she wants such as a beautiful diamond ring, a pair of dark glasses so she can look out at the snow without being blinded, and a



tour of the Italian house. She falls in love with it immediately and starts secretly spending time during the day while Truitt is at work. Eventually, he and Catherine are married, at the house with their vows witnessed by strangers. That night they make love for the first time, both of them restraining their desire and their previous experience. Their desire for each other increases, to the point where everything else in their days became merely tolerable during their anticipation of making love in the evening. Meanwhile, she is becoming less and less aware of the presence of the blue glass bottle and of its meaning. Finally, on New Year's Day, Catherine takes her dress and her dark glasses with the blue bottle is left behind and gets on a train for St. Louis in search of the long-lost Antonio.

Part 1 - Wisconsin, Fall, 1907 - Chapters 7, 8 and 9 Analysis

In Chapter 7, Truitt reveals still more information about his troubled past, a past that has some significant parallels with Catherine's. Further parallels between the two characters are revealed in Chapter 9, through the portrayal of the restraint that both display in their initial sexual encounter. This last, in turn, is an important point for the journeys of transformation in both characters, as both are finally able to re-connect with what was clearly for each of them an important, dominating aspect of their previous lives.

Other important elements in this section include Truitt's description of Emilia's death, which is markedly different from the story Antonio tells and the introduction to the narrative of the Italian house, which is important for a couple of reasons. First, the description of the house and Catherine's fascination with it foreshadows the important role it plays in her life and those of both Truitt and Antonio later in the narrative. At the same time, the simultaneous reference to the Italian secret garden, which is something of an Italian horticultural tradition that can be seen as a symbolic evocation and foreshadowing of Catherine's secrets, both her secret relationship with Antonio and her secret plan to kill Truitt). The house can also be seen as a symbolic representation of passion such as Emilia's passion for her lover, Catherine and Truitt's growing passion for each other, which grows even more once they move into the Italian house, and Antonio's angry passion for Catherine. This last manifests most dramatically and intensely in Chapter 24, in which his attempt to rape her takes place in the Italian house's conservatory.

Finally, there is the reference in Chapter 8 to Truitt's desire to have Antonio back in his life. The reference foreshadows his sending Catherine to St. Louis at the end of Chapter 9 and also foreshadows the ultimately life-destroying events that take place later in the narrative when Antonio actually does return.



Part 2 - St. Louis, Winter, 1908 - Chapters 10, 11 and 12

Part 2 - St. Louis, Winter, 1908 - Chapters 10, 11 and 12 Summary

Chapter 10: When Catherine arrives in St. Louis, she immediately feels the excitement of the city. She establishes herself in the high-end hotel that Truitt had booked for her and sets about making herself seem as quietly like the locals as she can - the right clothes, the right attitude, the right places at the right times. She meets with the private investigators (Malloy and Fisk) hired by Truitt to find Antonio and, while waiting for them to complete their investigation, fills her time at the public library, researching gardens in general and Italian secret gardens in particular, imagining herself recreating the garden in the Italian house. She also contemplates her relationship with Truitt, considering how much he seems to have enjoyed their nights of passion and how much she has enjoyed helping him have pleasure, but still remembering her plan - that someday, he'll die and she'll get his money. Eventually, Malloy and Fisk return with information about Antonio - he goes by the name Tony Moretti, plays piano and sings in whorehouses and bars (but not very well), travels from place to place across the country, and spends his free time with women and doing drugs. They attempt to talk Catherine out of pursuing Antonio any further, but she insists that they continue, adding that she wants to observe him before actually meeting him, and suggests the three of them dine at the restaurant he frequents once he finishes his performance. Malloy and Fisk reluctantly agree.

Chapter 11: While waiting for Malloy and Fisk to pick her up, Catherine looks through her gardening books, but her nervousness does not ease as she wonders how she is going to follow through on her plan of getting rid of Truitt when there is a son and heir in the picture. Malloy and Fisk finally arrive, and they go to the restaurant. Shortly afterwards, Antonio arrives, is shown immediately to a table, and has food brought right away. Catherine studies him, his movements and his looks, with narration commenting on how absolutely beautiful he is, how all the other women stare at him, and how all the men look at him with disgust. After he finishes his food, Antonio plays the piano, a piece of popular music that he infuses with stylish emotional intensity. Catherine finds herself very moved. After a scattering of applause and Antonio starts to leave, his playing apparently serving as payment of his bill, he stops by Catherine's table, makes flirtatious small talk, and goes. Malloy and Fisk again try to talk Catherine out of pursuing him any further, but Catherine says they're there to do Truitt's bidding, and will see him again.

Chapter 12: Catherine's mind and body quickly become preoccupied with fantasies about Antonio. On the day she and the investigators are to visit him, she dresses carefully, excitedly. After Malloy and Fisk pick her up, they make their way through an intensely poor part of town to where Moretti is staying, and discover him in his beautifully furnished, but messy, apartment. Malloy and Fisk suggest that he is Truitt's



son, but he refuses to believe them, giving what he says is his true family history in rebuttal. As he's becoming angry, Catherine tells him who she is, and that Truitt has told her to do whatever it takes. He angrily repeats that he is not the man they think he is and that he wants them to leave. The three searchers go, saying they'll come back. On their way home Catherine, who is strangely elated, buys a canary from a street vendor and takes it back to her hotel.

Part 2 - St. Louis, Winter, 1908 - Chapters 10, 11 and 12 Analysis

As the second part of the novel begins, the narrative shifts focus almost entirely to Catherine, a circumstance that on some level she is the book's primary protagonist. It's important to note, however, that simply because a character has more page time, more narrative attention paid to him or her, it doesn't necessarily mean that that character is a protagonist, or in this case the narrative's sole protagonist. There is, in fact, some question as to why the narrative spends so much time and detail exploring the relationship between Catherine and Antonio, particularly in the following section. It could be argued that such a relatively expansive amount of narrative time is necessary in order for the reader to get a full, complete sense of the depth and intensity of the two characters' feelings. On the other hand, it could also be argued that the portrayal of those feelings is somewhat repetitive and borderline indulgent.

In any case, it's interesting to note here some other interesting elements. First, there is the juxtaposition of Catherine's choices in clothing and demeanor with the extravagance of both Antonio's choices and the intensity of her feelings, not to mention the total lack of restraint Catherine displays in the following section. Then there is her deepening interest in the secret garden and in gardens in general. The first is a metaphoric representation of her deepening interest in her own passion and her own secrets. The second, Catherine's interest in gardens in general, on the other hand, can be seen as a symbolic foreshadowing of her gradually emerging interest in a new life, a new way of being that includes new growth in the garden, new growth in her, not only a new identity but the child she becomes pregnant with. This idea of connection between growth in the garden and growth in character is reiterated in the book's final chapter, Chapter 25, in which she vividly imagines such new growth returning to the garden in the same way as new growth is taking place inside her, both in the physical form of the child and in the spiritual form of self-respect.

Finally, there is the introduction of the canary, its impulsive, passionate, sensual color and appearance both foreshadowing and symbolically evoking the personal, sexual and emotional freedom that Catherine comes to experience first with Antonio and later with Truitt.



Part 2 - St. Louis, Winter, 1908, Chapters 13 and 14

Part 2 - St. Louis, Winter, 1908, Chapters 13 and 14 Summary

Chapter 13: Catherine makes herself wait for five days before returning to Antonio. During that time, she fantasizes even more about being with him, makes plans for her garden, and writes letters to Truitt describing the situation and saying that, against the advice of the watchful detectives, she wants to visit Antonio alone. Truitt sends a letter in response saying free she's to do whatever she likes, and Catherine realizes just how thoroughly he is in her control. After the five days are over, she dresses carefully and goes, alone, to Manetti's apartment. When he opens his door and sees who it is, he pulls her into the apartment. Soon they are making love, and spending days doing so. Catherine becomes lost in what was her old life of sex, drugs, and self indulgence, falling in love with Antonio and promising him everything, including Truitt's money once he's dead. Antonio, still furious with his father and refusing to believe her protestations that he's changed, tells her he saw Truitt beat his mother to death. Calling Catherine a whore, he tells her he only wants Truitt dead and to live in the Italian house. She promises him it will happen, refers to the arsenic she has in her possession and asks him to be patient. He tells her that slowly, she is re-opening his heart. Onbe day, Catherine looks at the gaudy clothes she's bought herself and keeps in Antonio's closet, recalls the life she used to live, realizes she can't go back to the idealized life she lived as a child, and then carefully washes and dresses, resuming her disguise.

Chapter 14: Catherine spends her nights with Antonio and her days sleeping at her hotel, then after waking writing letters to Truitt, saying she needs more time to convince Antonio to come home. With Antonio she visits beer parlors and drug dens, sometimes asking after her younger sister Alice and being told she (Alice) is basically self-destructing. When they make love, he always withdraws before his orgasm, narration commenting that he didn't want to risk fathering a child. Meanwhile, Catherine tells him about Truitt, being careful to portray him in the most positive light possible and telling him everything about the Italian house is as it was. For his part, Antonio tells her repeatedly how vicious Truitt was and how his rage was only eased by heavy use of drugs and by sex. Eventually, angry with Catherine for again suggesting he come home, Antonio tells her that he knows where Alice is, narration commenting that he and Alice once had very quick, meaningless sex. When he says she is in "Wild Cat Chute," Catherine cries and Moretti smiles.



Part 2 - St. Louis, Winter, 1908, Chapters 13 and 14 Analysis

One of the interesting things to note about this section is how it explores and/or manifests the symbolic value of Catherine's clothes and specifically, the different aspects of her life that different clothes represent. In this section, those differences are particularly, and vividly, apparent. Other important points to note about this section include the reference to Catherine's sister and the reference to Antonio's habits around ejaculation (which prove particularly important to Catherine when she discovers she is pregnant. Then there is the reference to Antonio's habit of using the passion of sex, not to mention his drive for constant and varied sexual activity to suppress his feelings. Here it's particularly interesting to note that Truitt does something quite similar when he uses sexual activity as a means to suppress other feelings. In other words, in the same way as Truitt and Catherine have very similar characteristics in terms of their identity, past history, and their attitudes, so too Truitt and Antonio share similarities in behavior. Finally, there is the reference to Alice, to Antonio's brief and somewhat surprising encounter with her, and to the implication that finding her is not going to be the positive experience Catherine clearly hopes it is going to be.



Part 2 - St. Louis, Winter, 1908, Chapters 15 and 16

Part 2 - St. Louis, Winter, 1908, Chapters 15 and 16 Summary

Chapter 15: In the first part of this chapter, narration describes how Catherine and Alice struggled to survive after their mother died giving birth to Alice and their father eventually drank himself into a grieving death - Catherine was fourteen, Alice was seven. Alice was eventually put into a poorhouse, where she started school and passed on what she learned there to Catherine. Catherine quickly learned to sell her body to men, saving what money she could. Eventually they moved to Philadelphia where the cycle repeated itself, but with some additions - Catherine started going to the library and teaching herself, and also found a man to take care of her regularly, a man whom she one day finds in bed with twelve year old Alice. She and Alice then fled to New York, and the cycle again repeats itself, Alice eventually finding a man of her own. The women lose track of each other for a few years, finding each other by accident on Catherine's earlier visit to St. Louis. Their conversation, however, ended with Alice slapping Catherine and running away. When narration returns to the present, Catherine searches the slummy Wild Cat Chute and eventually finds her sister, but is surprised to have her offer to take her someplace nicer rejected. Alice says she never liked Catherine, and Catherine explains that she has always loved Alice, and has always been desperate to make life better for her. The initially angry conversation calms down, and Alice confesses that in her quiet moments, she realizes that Catherine did her best, thanks her and then tells her to go. As Alice falls asleep, Catherine sees something like an angel float down to Alice and believes that it has come to take her away but then the angel flies away, its arms empty. At that moment, Catherine realizes she can't kill Ralph Truitt. "She knew she couldn't bring harm to one living soul. Not any more." Catherine leaves Alice some money and her fur coat, knowing that by morning both would be gone.

Chapter 16: After leaving Alice and realizing that her sister is lost to her forever, Catherine stays crying in bed for two days. She attempts going to church, but the priest's well-meaning forgiveness means nothing to her. She then writes to Truitt, saying she's planning on coming home but not clearly stating whether Antonio is coming with her. On the day he sends his train for her, she visits Antonio one last time and begs him to release her from their arrangement to kill Truitt. He angrily insists that he won't, saying the only use she is to him is as a means to kill his father and adding that all he wants from Truitt is to watch him die. When she continues to refuse, he threatens to tell Truitt what they've been doing and then says it might be possible for them to love each other again. After he leaves, saying he doesn't want to hear from her again until Truitt is dead, she considers killing herself but then realizes the only thing she could do is what she's always done, which is to go on, and survive.



Part 2 - St. Louis, Winter, 1908, Chapters 15 and 16 Analysis

The narrative of Catherine and Alice's past life is, in its own way, as stark, as dark, and as soul-destroying as those of Truitt's and Antonio's pasts. Here again, the reader can see that all three of the main characters have a lot in common, all of which seems rooted in a common experience of suffering that, in turn, provides the foundation for an increasingly desperate desire for some kind of connection, of intimacy.

Meanwhile, the appearance of the angel can, at first glance, to be a somewhat strange interjection of magic realism into a circumstance mostly portrayed in relatively realistic terms, albeit within the context of a fairly romanticized narrative. On the other hand, in a similar fashion to how the Italian house can be seen as a metaphoric representation of passion and to how Catherine's clothing choices can be seen as metaphoric externalizations of her inner intentions, the appearance of the angel can be seen as a poetic representation of Catherine's hope. In other words, with the appearance of the angel, the author is again portraying Catherine's inner experience through the medium of an outward image, an experience that also manifests in her sudden change of heart about killing Truitt. This, in its turn, clearly marks a transformation in her character, one that has been building for quite some time. Her decision, as a result of this change of heart, to tell Antonio of the change sets in motion the events of the final section, laying the foundations for the inevitable three way conversation between the man with the money, the woman with the poison, and the man with enough anger to destroy them all.

One final point in relation to Alice is the repetition of the "such things happened" motif at the end of Chapter 15. Here, the phrase's apparent evocation of the novel's thematic interest in human unpredictability has the air of a shrug about it, almost a "what can you do" kind of helplessness. The idea here, as it sometimes is in other places where the motif manifests, is that in spite of one's best efforts, events and situations turn out differently from what is desired, or sought.



Part 3 - Wisconsin, Winter into Spring, 1908 - Chapters 17 and 18

Part 3 - Wisconsin, Winter into Spring, 1908 - Chapters 17 and 18 Summary

Chapter 17: Narration describes one of Truitt's bedtime rituals, drinking water left for him by Mrs. Larsen from a carved Italian glass taken from the Italian house, and how he sees Mrs. Larsen's actions in filling it as an act of tenderness of the sort he rarely, if ever, experienced anywhere else (particularly from his mother). Narration then describes his feelings at seeing Catherine step down from the train, alone, on her return from St. Louis and his feelings of despair when she tells him that Antonio rejects both the idea that he is Truitt's son and the invitation to come home. During a quiet dinner, Truitt's despair deepens. He suggests that he and Catherine move into the Italian house and wait for Antonio, and that he and Catherine have a child. Catherine agrees to both. Afterwards, they go up to bed, and for the first time Catherine waits for Truitt nude in his bed. Truitt makes love to her, intensely, passionately, and with the same sort of obliteration of feeling that Antonio experienced earlier not because he (Truitt) is beautiful, but because the intensity of sexual release obliterates all other feelings. Afterwards, he thanks Catherine for giving herself to him, and when she turns away, he realizes he's said the wrong thing, and his despair returns. Feeling his age and foolishness, he gets out of bed and drinks from his glass of water, noticing immediately that it tastes odd. Remembering his decadent days in Italy, he realizes he's being poisoned and also realizes he doesn't care.

Chapter 18: As the days and weeks pass, as Truitt continues to consciously take the poison appearing everywhere in his food, water, and clothes, he experiences a momentary surge in virility, a side effect of mild arsenic poisoning that he remembers from his days in Italy. He realizes, however, that the feeling won't last long and soon the poison will take its intended effect. Meanwhile, he and Catherine move into the Italian house, deeding the other house to Mr. and Mrs. Larsen. The time Truitt and Catherine spend together becomes more and more tender, more and more intimate - but the whole time, Truitt is aware of what's happening to him, his despair over Antonio deepening. The author describes several incidents in the area in which people lose their minds and behave destructively each description ending with a phrase similar to "such things happened." Truitt has some sense of why "such things happened. Also, Catherine's daily search for her lost jewels ends when Larsen finds them and brings them to her. At that point, as she recalls what the jewels had been intended for (i.e. to pay for a possible escape), Catherine realizes that in spite of her murderous intent, she doesn't really want to leave. One night during this time, Truitt weeps uncontrollably. After Catherine has changed their bedsheets, he tells her he knows what she's doing, and that he forgives her. In spite of her protestations she doesn't know what he's talking about, and telling him (for the first time) that she loves him, he insists, eventually falling



asleep. The author describes Catherine's deep reluctance to keep doing what she's doing, as she has truly started to love her husband, but her continuing because of the lingering threat of Antonio's exposing her. One last strange incident - Larsen, believing an unhealed burn was the mark of sin, cut off his hand and was put into hospital paid for by Truitt. The chapter concludes with a reference to Catherine, deliberately setting out to poison the husband who loved her and whom she loved.

Part 3 - Wisconsin, Winter into Spring, 1908 - Chapters 17 and 18 Analysis

There are several important points to note about this section. The first is the narrative's clear link between Truitt's glass, the Italian house, and poison, an important link given that, as previously discussed, the Italian house is a metaphoric representation of passion. In other words, the image of Truitt drinking poison from a glass from the Italian house suggests that he is, in fact, drinking poison because of passion - a combination of his own, Catherine's, and Antonio's. This link, between poison and passion, is reinforced by the reference to Truitt recognizing the taste of poison as the result of his time in Florence, during which time (as the narrative makes clear in Chapter 18) arsenic was used as a temporary aphrodisiac, or booster of sexual desire/energy. This time, however, he knows the poison is intended to be fatal, rather than rejuvenating, perhaps as much representative of his corrupt passion for bringing home his son, as his sexual passions. The link is reinforced even further by Truitt's and Catherine's move into the Italian house. They are literally living in passion, and Truitt is dying as the result of passion.

A third point to note is another clear link, this one between Truitt's affection for Mrs. Larson and the lack of affection he received from his mother. Mrs. Larson is clearly the mother figure he never had, and in some ways is the same for Catherine, her mother having died when she was very young. A fourth point is the reappearance of a motif that has been referred to throughout the narrative but manifests in much more vivid terms here. This is the commentary on the increasingly deranged actions of the townspeople, including Larsen. These actions, the narrative suggests, are the result of isolation - not just the physical isolation of being in such a cold, essentially empty, very lonely part of the world, but also the emotional and spiritual isolation caused both by that physical environment and emotion emptiness in a relationship. The juxtaposition of local madness with the madness of living in the Italian house and knowingly ingesting poison being given by the beloved is very telling indeed.

Then there is Truitt's revelation to Catherine that he knows what she's doing, and the subsequent actions by both that enable her to keep doing so. There is the sense here that Truitt really is giving into the self-destructive tendencies his mother once told him, through the use of the pin (Chapter 5), would corrupt him or at least, he is giving in to the belief in those tendencies. Only later, after Catherine stops poisoning him, does he realize and accept that perhaps both he and his mother were/are wrong. Yet another point is Catherine's continued lying since she has an opportunity to confess, to stop her murderous actions, to be forgiven, and to move on from the traumas of both her recent

and her distant past. She, however, is too caught up in her OWN self-destructive tendencies, her own self-hatred, to do so. Here again, the narrative draws clear parallels between the experiences and situations of the two main characters. Finally, the section closes with yet another reiteration of the "Such things happened" motif, again a manifestation of the book's thematic interest in how humanity surprises itself.



Part 3 - Wisconsin, Winter into Spring, 1908 - Chapters 19 and 20

Part 3 - Wisconsin, Winter into Spring, 1908 - Chapters 19 and 20 Summary

Chapter 19: Truitt's general health deteriorates quickly, and Catherine veers back and forth between acting on her love for Antonio and her growing love for Truitt. As he suffers traumatizing nightmares, deepening blisters, and painful oversensitivity to touch and hearing, he begins instructing Catherine in the ways and details of his business empire. A doctor diagnoses cancer, and Truitt begins to visit the churches in the area, seeking absolution and grace, hoping to ease his deepening sadness. Catherine stops administering the poison, then starts again, then stops, then starts, fully aware that she and Truitt are approaching the line where healing would no longer be possible. Truitt loses awareness of what's happening to him, coming to believe that he is suffering retribution for his youthful dissolution, that a disease contracted then is making its presence felt now. He starts spending his nights in the old house, coming back to Catherine in the days. Finally, Catherine tells him she can't do it, she can't and won't cause his death. He tells her he had thought he wanted to die. She promises to nurse him back to health, and that she will bring Antonio. "Until then," she says, "live for me."

Chapter 20: Catherine sends a telegram to Antonio, insisting that he "come at once". She then burns all of Truitt's clothes, anything that he and/or the poison might have contact with. She empties the blue bottle in the woods, and then travels to Chicago to meet her cousin India, whose photograph Catherine sent with her initial letter to Truitt. India, a quiet, sad woman takes her to a Chinese doctor who gives her a variety of expensive herbal medicines. After taking India to an expensive dinner, and after agreeing to give the drunken, eager India substantial amounts of money, Catherine spends the night in her hotel, waking in the morning with the realization that she's pregnant. She returns to Wisconsin, where she starts the treatments given to her by the Chinese doctor. As the treatments slowly begin to take effect, Catherine reflects on her life, how she squandered much of it and how she's changed. She also considers the baby, convincing herself that Truitt is the father - they made love the night she returned while she was menstruating, and Antonio never ejaculated into her, afraid of becoming a father himself. Meanwhile, Truitt continues to improve - damaged, and scarred, but increasingly healthy and Catherine continues to withhold news about her pregnancy. And then one night, while Truitt and Catherine are at dinner, Antonio arrives, saying he's Truitt's son. "And even though they both knew what the man said was a fiction," narration comments, "Ralph stepped into the dark and opened his arms."



Part 3 - Wisconsin, Winter into Spring, 1908 - Chapters 19 and 20 Analysis

Narrative momentum begins to accelerate in this section, as the characters move closer and closer to the climaxes of their individual journeys and the novel's climax in Chapter 24, in which all the individual climaxes come together into one explosive confrontation. Interesting points to note here include the parallels between Truitt's physical suffering and Catherine's emotional suffering (again drawing/reinforcing parallels between the two), and the reference to Truitt's belief that he is suffering from a disease caused by sexual misconduct in the past. The reference here is to syphilis, which was viewed by many, sufferers and non-sufferers alike, as retribution for immorality and promiscuity. There is also the sense here that Truitt is experiencing the seemingly justifiable suffering foretold by his mother. Chapter 19 concludes with an opportunity for both Catherine and Truitt to heal, to transcend their moral and sexual corruption once and for all. This marks a turning point for the characters and the novel, the point at which the action clearly starts moving towards that aforementioned climax.

The somewhat surprising appearance of India, the even more surprising revelation of Catherine's pregnancy, and the most surprising appearance of Antonio at his father's door all contribute to that sense of increasing narrative energy, of advancing momentum. There is the sense that, with his gesture at the end of Chapter 20, Truitt is opening his arms not only to the man he believes is his son but to his destiny. It could be argued, in fact, that the gesture is, in some ways, representative of how all three of the main characters are opening their arms to a destiny - or, at least, what they hope is their destiny. How that hope defines their actions, and how their actions define their lives, is the focus of exploration in the following chapters.



Part 3 - Wisconsin, Winter into Spring, 1908 - Chapters 21 and 22

Part 3 - Wisconsin, Winter into Spring, 1908 - Chapters 21 and 22 Summary

Chapter 21: After Antonio arrives, he moves into his own room in the Italian house some distance from the room shared by Truitt and Catherine. Aware that he is watching them Truitt and Catherine, in turn, become more quietly intimate. One night, Truitt confesses that Antonio reminds him of Emilia, and tells Catherine about the end of Emilia's life - how she moved to Chicago with the piano teacher (Moretti), refusing to get a divorce because she was Catholic ... how Moretti left her ... how Truitt sent her money ... how she refused to have anything to do with Antonio. Over the years, Truitt says, he heard stories of her many affairs, her drug use, her drinking, her being robbed, and finally her getting tuberculosis. In a last effort to get her to change, he says, he went to Chicago with Antonio to see her and, leaving Antonio outside, discovered her close to death and that she had dumped all her old dresses, her unpaid bills, dirty dishes, even unopened letters from Antonio, all into one cluttered room. With that, he says, he realized he could no longer even think about trying to help her, and simply abandoned her. A few months later, he says, she died. When Catherine tries to assure him he did the right thing, he angrily tells her that he acted out of a desire for revenge on his mother, and for all the tortures she put him through. He then goes to sleep, assuring Catherine that now Antonio has arrived, they will make it work. Catherine, for her part, realizes that Antonio lied to her about what happened between his father and mother, and also realizes that things have changed for her. As the days pass, as winter becomes spring, and as Antonio's behavior becomes more and more self-indulgent and rebellious, Truitt tells Catherine that Antonio is behaving the way he did at his age. He also persists in his efforts to interest Antonio in the business in spite of Antonio's evident disinterest, outright contempt, and constant complaining. When Truitt goes into town on business, Antonio continually reminds Catherine of her arrangement and of his threat (i.e. to tell Truitt of their history) in spite of Catherine insisting that the agreement is no longer valid. Truitt continues to improve, Antonio becomes more difficult, and Catherine wonders how she's going to get out of this situation, at the same time fully aware of her pregnancy, and that the child is Truitt's.

Chapter 22: Antonio continues to indulge himself with a new horse, a new car, and a new woman, tiring of all of them quickly. He continues to insist to Catherine that she follow through on their plan, even as Truitt is becoming physically stronger, more sure of his relationship with Catherine and more active in business. The household staff is increasing in numbers, the house itself is redecorated, Catherine and Truitt get themselves new clothes, and spring becomes more and more evident. Antonio develops a relationship with a young widow in town, Violet Alverson, in spite of Truitt's urgings to leave her in peace. Mrs. Alverson comes to dinner one night and makes a good



impression on Truitt and Catherine. The next day, however, Antonio writes her a letter in which he refuses to see her anymore. The day after that she kills herself, her baby left behind. Catherine and Truitt attend the funeral. Antonio stays home and plays the piano.

Part 3 - Wisconsin, Winter into Spring, 1908 - Chapters 21 and 22 Analysis

The most interesting point to note about this section is the contrast between Truitt's relationship with Catherine and his relationship with Antonio, the former clearly becoming more rewarding and fulfilling than either ever imagined, the latter proving more challenging. On another level, the relationship between Truitt and Catherine can be seen as putting the past in the past, with the characters getting over, at least to some degree, their painful histories. They both have a certain distance to go, certainly, but they are moving forward more clearly and more gracefully than Antonio who, by contrast, seems powerfully and painfully stuck in HIS past. His treatment of the unfortunate Violet Alverson is a manifestation of how his self-hatred also becomes outwardly directed, in the way that Catherine's once did (i.e. manifesting in her desire to take advantage of, and eventually kill, Truitt). Meanwhile, the description of the discarded, decaying past cluttered together in Emilia's spare room can be seen as evoking the painful pasts of all the characters. The story of her death not only portrays the suffering that awaits if that past is not dealt with (as Catherine and Truitt are both doing), but also foreshadows the death that awaits Antonio who like his mother, also wallows not only in the past, but in corrupted dreams of an indulgent and irresponsible, yet fear-ridden future.

Finally, and as previously discussed, the weather can be seen as a reflection of the internal experiences and/or situations of the characters.



Part 3 - Wisconsin, Winter into Spring, 1908 - Chapters 23, 24 and 25

Part 3 - Wisconsin, Winter into Spring, 1908 - Chapters 23, 24 and 25 Summary

Chapter 23: Antonio and Truitt carefully start having conversations with each other about the past and the future, with Truitt patiently insisting that he regrets what happened between them in the past and Antonio gradually coming to realize that the hatred, the self-loathing, and the self-indulgence that kept his father at bay have ultimately left him (Antonio) empty and desperate. He spends long drunken nights weeping in his old nursery in the Italian house, where his toys and even his blanket have been left untouched for years, realizing that he has started to feel differently about Truitt, and about himself. He continues to fantasize about Catherine, but she consistently keeps her distance. He contemplates the arsenic he brought with him from Chicago as a means to end his own life and writes suicide notes in which he reveals everything that happened between him and Catherine, but burns them.

Chapter 24: Antonio visits Catherine in the conservatory, where she sits sewing a new dress. He insists again that they can be together in the old way, but she again insists that their time together was another life, that she was another person. When he touches her shoe, she sends him away but after retreating and drinking some brandy he returns, wanting her and desperate to take her. In spite of her violent resistance, he rips off her dress, grabs her, kisses her, and rapes her. In self-defense, she stabs him with her sewing scissors, crying out "Why?" He falls back, saying again that it was because Truitt tortured and killed his mother. Catherine shouts that he made that story up, that Truitt never hurt Emilia. At that moment, Truitt comes. Antonio tells him of the past he (Antonio) and Catherine share. Truitt attacks him. Antonio flees into the house, Truitt and Catherine following. Antonio hits Truitt with a poker from the fireplace and runs out. Catherine tries to calm Truitt, but he runs out, catching up with Antonio and fighting with him out onto the field. Catherine, joined by Mrs. Larsen, watches as the two raging men bloody each other, Antonio eventually ending up on the pond and Truitt on its banks, both of them empty of anger. Suddenly the thin ice cracks, and Antonio goes through. Unable to find his way back to the surface, he drowns. The desperate Truitt retrieves a rope and a pole, but it's too late - the next morning, Antonio's body is retrieved and taken away. Catherine packs away his things, weeping bitterly at the memories awakened by all the smells of him that remain. The chapter concludes with narrative commentary on the pain and loneliness at the heart of the lives of Truitt, Emilia, Antonio and Catherine, as well as their families. "It was just," narration comments, "a story about despair."

Chapter 25: Catherine, Truitt and Mrs. Larsen are the only people to go to Antonio's funeral service and burial where his body is placed in a plot near his sister, Francesca,



and Truitt's parents. Two days later Catherine, in the dress she was sewing when Antonio attacked her, stands in the still-untended Italian garden, convinced that Truitt would soon dismiss her, fearing returning to the life she left behind, not knowing how to tell him about the baby. As she recalls how her relationship with Truitt began, she imagines life returning to the long-dead Italian garden - grass greening, flowers blooming, statues again standing upright, and herself and Truitt enjoying it together. The dream is interrupted by Truitt, who tells her that he has known the truth about her visit to St. Louis even before she came back - Malloy and Fisk had told him. He also says it's private, and it means nothing. Catherine chooses her words carefully, saying that she is expecting a child. At that, Truitt invites her to come with him into the house. She looks at the garden and follows him in.

Part 3 - Wisconsin, Winter into Spring, 1908 - Chapters 23, 24 and 25 Analysis

Narrative momentum, which had already been building over the last few chapters, increases its pace throughout this section, building to the climactic confrontation between Catherine, Truitt, and Antonio in Chapter 25. Here it's important to note several things. The first is how Antonio finally begins to get in touch with the grief and loss that have been driving him, the past that has haunted him, and how his feelings are too strong, and his discovery of them too late, to make the kind of recovery from that past that Truitt and Catherine have been making from theirs. The second important point to note is the symbolic value of Antonio's tearing away of Catherine's dress. Then there is the confrontation between Truitt and Antonio, with its outbursts of violence and ultimate, some might say tragic, end. Here again there is symbolic value to the setting - specifically, to the fact that Antonio runs out on the thin ice, as it were, of the melting pond. The metaphor here has two layers of meaning - first, as an evocation of the thinness of the reconciliation between Antonio and Truitt and secondly, as an evocation of the thin veneer of sanity that Antonio has constructed between his present and his past. When he slips through the ice, he metaphorically slips through that veneer, symbolically "drowning" in the suffering that he believes entirely makes up his past identity.

Meanwhile, the previously discussed connection between Catherine's new life and the life of the Italian garden (see Chapter 10) manifests vividly in Chapter 25. Catherine's vision of healthy, blossoming new life in the garden (as opposed to the sexually corrupt decadence represented by the rest of the Italian house) corresponds almost exactly with her vision of new life in her child and in her marriage. Truitt's revelation that he already knew about her affair with Antonio is not entirely surprising, given that his determined interest in knowing the truth about those with whom he is involved has already been demonstrated through his search for Antonio. His actions are also, however, quite surprising, in that he is so able to forgive her and so apparently willing to put that part of her past in the past, which is, ultimately, what he has done with his own past. It is therefore no surprise that the novel concludes with yet another manifestation of the "such things happen" motif which is, also as previously discussed, is a representation of

the novel's thematic interest in the ways human beings CAN surprise each other, and the mysterious ways of life and the human heart can surprise human beings.



Characters

Ralph Truitt

Middle-aged businessman Ralph Truitt is one of the novel's two central characters or protagonists. In the novel's early stages, Truitt is portrayed as a man who has struggled to lock the pain and suffering of his past, as well as what he sees as his depraved sexual drives, deep inside himself, disconnecting himself from feelings, dreams, and hope. Over the course of the narrative, as the result of the various positive and negative influences Catherine has on him, a complicated mix of remorse, sensuality, hope and relief is released, leaving him open to the possibility and eventual development, of love for the wife he found by advertising in a newspaper. That love survives what many would call extremely challenging circumstances. The first is the awareness that the woman he loves is trying to kill him, but in that case his acceptance is shaped as much by his despair about failing to connect with his estranged son as it is anything else. Eventually, and after the son has left Truitt's life, he also accepts that that Catherine had a passionate sexual affair with the son. Interestingly, the narrative never really makes it clear why Truitt manifests this act of forgiveness. There are two main possibilities: one, that he truly loves her so much that anything she does is forgivable, and two, that his own awareness of his sexual history makes it possible for him to forgive hers. Whatever the reason, the narrative concludes with both Truitt and Catherine having done their best to put their respective dark pasts behind, and preparing to move into a new, healthier, and more loving future together.

Catherine Land

Catherine is the book's second protagonist, a woman in her early thirties who lived a life of desperation for many years, having to resort to begging, thieving, prostitution, and larceny simply to survive. She begins the narrative planning to continue along this path of behavior, determined to marry Ralph Truitt and then kill him, in order to inherit his money. Mercenary and selfish, she finds herself transformed first by Truitt's barely concealed vulnerability, then by the intimacy that springs up between them as the result of their sexual union. When Truitt sends her in search of his long lost son Antonio, however, her licentious and sexually adventurous history comes back to haunt her, as her long-restrained lusts resurface the moment she and Antonio are alone. When she returns to Truitt's home she is more determined than ever to kill him, but because Truitt himself is changing and becoming more vulnerable, compassionate, and open, she finds herself changing, eventually realizing that because she loves the man she planned to kill, she cannot follow through on her original intent. As she nurses him back to physical health and as the narrative suggests, she is nursing herself to emotional health, finding herself able to resist Antonio's increasingly determined attempts to rekindle their relationship. The discovery that she's pregnant with Truitt's child increases her determination to focus her life on his, enabling her to fight off Antonio's attempted rape, to survive Antonio's raging revelation about her history, and to graciously accept



Truitt's proffered love and companionship at the narrative's conclusion. In short, Catherine and Truitt share similar journeys of transformation, in many ways acting as each other's primary antagonists as well as co-protagonists.

Antonio

The young, selfish, and decadent Antonio is Truitt's legal son, but not his biological one. Truitt's Italian wife Emilia had an affair with her equally Italian piano teacher. Antonio was born as a result of that affair and, as a result of that affair being discovered by Truitt, abandoned by his mother. Years of conflict with Truitt resulted in Antonio leaving home and living a life of drugs, alcohol and free sex, years that culminate in his affair with Catherine. His determination to see his father suffering and dead leads him into brutalizing Catherine, forcing her to follow through on her plan to kill Truitt and eventually raping her. Caught by his father, Antonio reveals the truth of Catherine's past, but accidentally dies when he falls through shallow ice on a nearby pond. The particularly interesting thing about the character of Antonio is the way in which he, in spite of not being Truitt's biological son, has similar attitudes towards sexuality and women, a similarity commented upon by Truitt himself. But while Truitt is able to gain control over his desires, Antonio does not and ends up dead.

Truitt's Parents

Truitt's businessman father and religiously conservative mother shaped his childhood with firm hands, and in doing so shaped his adulthood as well. The father indoctrinated him in business, while the mother indoctrinated him in self-hatred, telling him there was a monster inside him that needed to be killed and subsequently abusing him, emotionally and physically, in order to get rid of that monster. Both damaged him quite severely, but by the end of the narrative, Truitt has managed to move through their influence and claimed his own identity.

Emilia

Italian born aristocrat Emilia is Truitt's first wife. Penniless and greedy, she and her parents agree that she should marry Truitt for his money. She ends up taking advantage of him, but takes the pursuit of her desires too far into the realm of an affair and is thrown out of Truitt's life as a result. Abandoned by her lover, dismissive of her children, she descends into a life of drugs, alcohol, and sex and has a painful death.

Francesca (Franny)

Francesca is the daughter of Truitt and Emilia, beloved by the former and forgotten by the latter. A childhood disease results in a delay in Francesca's mental and emotional development and in her early death. Truitt mourns her deeply and blames himself for her eventual unhappy demise.



Mrs. Larsen

Mrs. Larsen is Truitt's cook and housekeeper. Middle-aged, quiet, and reserved, Mrs. Larson is devoted to Truitt's well being and extends that devotion to Catherine when she becomes his wife. She is the kind of loving mother figure that Truitt never had as a child.

Mr. Larsen

Larsen is Mrs. Larsen's husband, but appears much less frequently. Suspicious of Catherine from the moment she appears in Truitt's life, as opposed to his wife, who treats her with loyalty and respect, Larsen never warms up to her. Eventually, Larsen is portrayed as one of several local people who behave in an insane manner as the result of having to live through the long, cold, and dark Wisconsin winter.

Mr. Malloy, Mr. Fisk

Malloy and Fisk are the latest in a string of private detectives hired by Truitt to track down his son Antonio. The two are virtually indistinguishable from each other, but do their job, taking Catherine to meet Antonio as they were ordered. Narration at the end of the book reveals that they were also engaged, by Truitt, to keep an eye on Catherine and her behavior and after noting her actions while in St. Louis, sent documentation of those actions to Truitt.

Alice

Alice is Catherine's younger sister, their mother dying as the result of Catherine's birth. Alice is portrayed as selfish, promiscuous, and lazy, entering into a similar life to that which Catherine entered into but unlike Catherine, remaining trapped in that life and sinking lower and lower into depravity. When Catherine attempts to help her improve her life, Alice is at first angry and resentful, but eventually is able to thank Catherine for everything she did.

India

India is Catherine's cousin. Her first appearance is in the book's first chapter, in which narration reveals that Catherine has used a photograph of the plain and essentially unattractive India to trigger Truitt's interest. India herself has an essentially kind soul, helping Catherine out when she needs help treating Truitt's arsenic poisoning, but eventually, when she has had a lot to drink, can't stop herself from asking Catherine for money, convinced that having more cash will enable her to get her long-dreamed-of husband.



Violet Alvenson

The hapless and vulnerable Violet Alvenson is a young widow with a child whom Antonio begins a relationship with, but cruelly drops when he realizes how dull she is. Her subsequent suicide is clearly linked to Antonio's behavior and in that sense can be seen as a symbolic representation of the sort of selfishness displayed by Antonio and ultimately avoided by Catherine.



Objects/Places

Wisconsin

The American state of Wisconsin, in the upper Midwest near the Great Lakes, is the setting for much of the novel's action. The pressures of its climate and isolation are primary factors in the mindset of many of the background characters.

The Wisconsin Winter

The long, cold, and dark Wisconsin winter is an important contextual trigger for the undercurrent of madness that threads its way through the novel's background action.

Truitt's House

This is the house where Catherine is brought as Truitt's new bride and strikes her on first glance as surprisingly appealing. Furnished in an unusual but comfortable mix of the rustic and expensive, she spends much of her time there after she arrives moving from room to room, restless and staring out its windows into the winter.

The Italian House

In order to please his Italian wife Emilia, Truitt spends a fortune designing and building a home for her on his estate in the Italian style. After Truitt kicks her out, he moves back to his old house, but moves back to the Italian house when Catherine comes into his life.

The Secret Garden

While the Italian house was being designed and built, Emilia asked for and received a typical Italian garden with fruit trees, statuary, and multitudes of flowers, hidden by tall walls from public view. When Catherine moves into Truitt's life, the garden had been abandoned for many years, but she constructs elaborate plans to bring it back to its beauty. The garden can be seen as a metaphoric representation of the souls of both Catherine and Truitt that are long derelict but reawakened by the appearance of love.

The Blue Glass Bottle

As Catherine unpacks when she first arrives at Truitt's house, the author describes a small blue glass bottle in detail but does not indicate why it is important until later. Eventually, it is revealed that the bottle contains arsenic, with which Catherine intends to



kill Truitt. The bottle recurs several times in the narrative as a metaphoric representation and a reiteration of that intention.

St. Louis

After Catherine is married, she is sent by Truitt to St. Louis to seek out and bring home his son, Antonio. St. Louis is described as a place where Catherine can live the life she used to live where "people came here to be bad. People came here to do the things they couldn't do at home. Smoke cigarettes. Have sex. Make their way in the world." (p. 115). She falls back into this lifestyle the minute she meets Antonio.

Antonio's Apartment

Antonio's apartment in St. Louis is run down, decadent, and cluttered and is the setting for Catherine's initial encounter with him and most of their intense and passionate affair.

Catherine's Clothes

Throughout the narrative, what Catherine wears is evocative of the personality she intends to assume.

Truitt's Glass

Truitt's carved crystal glass, taken from the Italian house, is filled with fresh cold water and placed by his bedside every night by the devoted Mrs. Larsen. Drinking this water is a ritual with him, meaning that he is able to tell when it is being tampered with or laced with poison by Catherine).

Chicago

Later in the narrative, when Catherine has put an end to her attempt to kill Truitt, she journeys to Chicago in search of non-traditional remedies that can heal him. There, she reunites with her cousin India, whose likeness she had borrowed as part of her plan to lure Truitt into marriage.



Themes

The Power of Sexual Desire

Intense sexual drive and acting on that drive, are among the primary driving forces of all three (Truitt, Catherine, Antonio) of the book's central characters. All three want a lot of sex and each reacts differently to their wants. Truitt judges himself all his life and thanks to his mother, considers himself corrupt. Catherine first uses sex as a means of survival, indulges herself in sex, represses her desires in order to get money and security, and then finds those desires released in a surge of passion with Antonio, which she then represses them once again. Antonio defines himself almost entirely by both his desire and his acting on that desire, realizing eventually that all his sexual activity is merely a barely-functioning stopper for the overflowing bottle of grief and loneliness filling and refilling within him. It's important to note, however, that for both Catherine and Truitt, coming to connect their sexual experience with one of love, affection, and trust enables and fuels change within them. Sexuality, for each of them opens the door to an intimacy and vulnerability that neither of them had ever really experienced in all their previous sexual experiences. Both learn that sexuality is not innately corrupt or corrupting, that there can be a relationship between sexuality and healing, and that there is deep, intense value in using sexuality to develop intimacy, rather than hide from it. It's interesting to note that in this context, that Antonio never learns this lesson and dies, while Catherine and Truitt, who do learn this lesson, produce a new life together: a child.

The Unpredictable Nature of Humanity

The phrase "such things happened" occurs several times throughout the narrative, always at occasions when the characters have had an experience that has surprised them and/or awakened them to new possibilities and triggered new discoveries in themselves, about each other, or about the world. These discoveries can be positive, as in the end of the novel, or negative, as in the resolution of what happens to Alice. With each appearance of this motif, or repeated verbal image, the novel seems to suggest that even that which has seemed unchangeable or necessary has the potential to become something other than what was perceived to be immutable or locked in place. There are also times, perhaps paradoxically contrasting times, at which the novel makes the statement with an attitude of a shrug, almost a sense of why fight it, stuff happens, and all anyone can do is accept it and move on. To take that even further, there is also the sense that the phrase evokes the idea of fatalism, that things are going to "happen" no matter how hard people try to avoid them or redirect them. In short, there are, the phrase seems to suggest, no unlikelihoods - that no matter how strange a situation or an action or a choice may appear to be at first glance, that situation or action or choice may have happened in the past and might happen in the future, but in any case is certainly happening now. It may seem like coincidence or luck, a contrivance or an improbability, but in the world of the novel and perhaps in the so-called "real world", "such things happen" all the time. It could be argued that the phrase



is an authorial contrivance, an attempt at putting a philosophical justification onto what might seem like a writer's desires rather than an organic, realistic development in a character's life. Whether that's the case or not, the point still remains that not only do coincidences really exist, but that humanity is capable of experiencing more, and choosing more, than it often believes, accepts, or imagines.

The Dangers of Isolation

The characters experience several sorts of isolation in the narrative, each with either active or perceived negative effects. The placement of much of the action in an isolated community in an isolating climate of a cold and hard winter places steadily increasing pressure on the characters. It drives them inward, leading them to question and confront their troubling inner selves. It's interesting to note however, that the physical isolation of the setting is also a metaphor, an externalization of various forms of inner isolation. This is true not just of emotional loneliness but also moral loneliness exemplified by Truitt's isolation by his passionate sexual desires and Catherine's isolation because of her need for security and her determination to kill. Emotional loneliness is evident in Truitt and Catherine both longing for love and security and spiritual loneliness by Truitt and Catherine longing for some kind of meaning and some kind of transcendent spiritual companionship. The fact that the narrative repeatedly comments on how the physical isolation enforced by winter in Wisconsin leads to mental and physical destruction of the self, of elements of the self, and of others therefore suggests that the sort of moral, emotional and spiritual isolation experienced by Catherine and Truitt and to some degree, Antonio, are themselves destructive. The way out of these dangers, the narrative suggests, is to find a path towards trust, love, intimacy and respect. Catherine and Truitt find their way there, end up redeemed, and also end up having a baby. Antonio abandons that path, if he was ever on it in the first place, trapped in the emotional isolation imposed by his grief and rage, and ends up destroyed. The moral here is to transcend isolation. Reach out. Connect. Redemption, peace, and forgiveness await.

Style

Point of View

The narrative primarily unfolds from the parallel points of view of its two central characters, Ralph Truitt and Catherine Land. Most of the time, that point of view shifts from chapter to chapter, not necessarily alternatively but frequently there are sections in which narrative focus stays longer with one than with the other. For example, the entirety of Section 2 focuses almost entirely on Catherine's viewpoint. There are occasional diversions into the point of view of other characters, most notably Antonio. This takes place often in the aforementioned Section 2, but also in the latter chapters of Section 3 in which Antonio's reactions to being back in his childhood home and to his father's overtures of relationship are examined in considerable detail. This sense of shifting point of view, of similar intensity of observation between the two main characters, reinforces the idea that they are in many ways co-protagonists, and also allows for and reinforces the emotional, spiritual, and experiential parallels between the two characters.

Another important point to note about the novel's point of view is that it makes no judgment or commentary on the behavior of the characters. It does not suggest, for example, that Catherine's duplicity is bad or that Truitt's capacity for forgiveness is good. What it does is portray the characters thoroughly, good and bad points alike, as well as the character's judgments upon themselves. In other words, the narrative seems to be written from the perspective that it is up to the reader, not the author, to define how negatively the reader should see the characters. In that sense, the book's overall point of view could well be described as quite objective, in spite of the fact that it focuses intently on the characters' subjective experiences of themselves.

Setting

There are three important points to note about the novel's setting. The first is its placement in time, specifically, the early years of the 20th Century, a time when mechanization and industrialization were only just becoming dominant forces in politics, in economics, and in society. It was a time of great energy and expansion, of opportunity and possibility, which makes it an appropriate setting for a narrative in which characters such as Catherine and Truitt are discovering and making the most of new spiritual opportunities. It's important to note, however, that this period was also a time of considerable moral conservatism, a time when the religion-dominated morality of people like Truitt's mother was extremely common, the measuring stick of virtually all personal and social behavior. Truitt and Catherine butt up against this morality in several ways with Truitt challenging it and Catherine pretending to play its game. Non-procreative sexuality or sex for a purpose other than making a baby was morally and socially frowned upon. This means that not only would the extramarital sexuality practiced by Catherine and Antonio have been profoundly frowned upon. It would also



mean that the frequent, intense, and purposeful sex for pleasure experienced by Truitt and Catherine, even within the boundaries of their marriage vows, would also have been frowned upon.

The second important element of setting in the narrative relates to its setting in place. Here again, there are two points. The first is that the majority of the narrative is set in winter-isolated Wisconsin, which is cold, barren, and empty. The environment is portrayed throughout the novel as being a contributor to the kind of insanity that infects not only many of the people in the area around Truitt's home, but also, quite possibly, both Truitt and Catherine themselves. The second key point about the novel's setting in place is the contrast the narrative draws between the isolated life of the country and the lively, decadent, some might say corrupt life of the city. Immorality abounds and there is little or no portrayal of positivity in city life at all since the city is corrupt and corrupting and a clear contrast to the white and cold moral judgment associated with the white and cold winter of the countryside.

That, in turn, leads to the third key component of the book's setting, which is its placement during the year. It starts in the dead of winter, moves through that winter and into spring. This is a timeframe that reflects in quite a significant way the experiences and transformations of the characters.

Language and Meaning

The play's language is rich and often poetic, at times almost stream of consciousness in the intensity and detail with which it portrays the experiences of its characters, and the various environments, both geographical and architectural, in which those experiences take place. The inner and outer lives of the characters each receive the same sort of attention, although it's fairly clear that their inner lives of their feelings, their memories, their ideals, and their goals are of ultimately more interest to the author, who clearly defines relationships between the inner and the outer world. Feeling and motivation manifest as behavior, while behavior reveals feeling and motivation. The author describes feeling, motivation, and behavior in vivid and at times exquisite and at other times overwhelming detail. There are times, in fact, when the writing becomes almost gothic, ornate, and intimately specific, examining and commenting on an action or emotion with curlicues and embellishments of detail. This is particularly true of the narrative's many sex scenes, which are described with a sensual explicitness that is careful to not veer into the prurient, the crude, or the obscene. There is the occasional and unfortunate sense that the writer sometimes gets carried away with word and images and that story gets drowned out, momentarily, by description. There is possible value in this aspect of the work, in that on some level, all the characters are overwhelmed by feeling and desire. That said, there's a fine line to walk between that sort of overwhelming and the sort that engulfs the reader in words and images that, while colorful and evocative, are ultimately repetitive and borderline indulgent. In short, while the language is rich and engaging, the meaning it seems intended to communicate might have been edged or etched the same thing repeatedly.



Structure

The narrative's structure is essentially linear, moving from situation to situation, action to reaction to action, event to event in a fairly traditional, cause-and-effect fashion. In other words, its plot is basically horizontal and always moving forward. There are times however, when the narrative's movement becomes more vertical, with the author exploring the feelings and circumstances of a particular moment or experience in considerable detail before moving on to enacting how that moment effects and defines the moment to come next. Another point to note about the book's structure is how that structure is reflective of both its setting and the journeys of its characters. Weather is a symbolic reflection and evocation of the inner experiences of the characters, their situations, and transformations. The divisions within the book's structure including its three parts defined by their placement in the year, can therefore also be seen as reflecting situation and transformation. One final point to note about structure is that it also relates to another aspect of setting, in that Parts 1 and 3 are set in the more morally restricted Wisconsin countryside and Part 2 is set in the more morally open life of the city. Here again structure reflects circumstance, here again structure supports and helps to define the meaning of both circumstance and the actions that take place within those circumstances. Perhaps most notably, in this instance structure can be seen as reflecting most particularly the inner life of Catherine, her true, passionate, and indulgent identity, as manifest in Part 2, buried within explorations of her Wisconsin-defined morality in Parts 1 and 3.



Quotes

"He felt that in all the vast and frozen space in which he lived his life - every hand needy, every heart wanting something from him - everybody had a reason to be and a place to land. Everybody but him. For him there was nothing. In all the cold and bitter world, there was not a single place for him to sit down." (Chapter 1, p. 4).

"The trick is to relax into the cold, accept that it had come and would stay a long time. To lean into it, as you might lean into a warm spring wind. The trick was to become part of it, so that you didn't end a backbreaking day in the cold with rigid, aching shoulders and red hands." (Ibid, p. 5).

"For twenty years he had not been kissed by anyone whose name he knew, and yet, even now, as the snow began to fall lightly, he remembered what it felt like, the soft giving of the lips, the sweet hunger of it." (Ibid, p. 12).

"He had sent her no photograph in return, nor had she asked for one. He had sent instead a ticket, sent it to the Christian boardinghouse in which she stayed in filthy, howling Chicago, and now he stood, a rich man in a tiny town in a cold climate, at the start of a Wisconsin winter in the year 1907. Ralph Truitt waited for the train that would bring Catherine Land to him." (Ibid, p. 13).

"Catherine Land liked the beginnings of things. The pure white possibility of the empty room, the first kiss, the first swipe at larceny. And endings, she liked endings, too. The drama of the smashing glass, the dead bird, the tearful goodbye, the last awful word which could never be unsaid or unremembered." (Chapter 2, p. 15).

"It was, she realized now, the beginning of desire. It was glory, the light, and the crimson clouds. It was the face of Jesus. It was love. Love without end. Desire without object. She had never known or felt it since." (Ibid, p. 19).

"She recounted her memories as they reeled into her past ... sewed them away as neatly as she had sewn her jewels in the hem of her skirt, needing to erase the intricacies of where she had been so she might become the simplicity of where she was going." (Ibid, p. 24).

"She could see the effort it cost him to keep his face composed, hopeful, and she could see the sadness that lay beneath the steely composure, the lack of life in him." (Chapter 4, p. 43).

"Her true heart, however, was buried so far inside her, so gone beneath the vast blanket of her lies and deceptions and whims. Like her jewels now beneath the snow, it lay hidden until some thaw might come to it. She had no way of knowing, of course, whether this heart she imagined herself to have was real in any way." (Ibid, p. 49).



"He loved sex and he hated it. He loved bad women because he didn't care if he destroyed them. There was a core of hatred in his hunger for them that never ever went away, a distaste that bit like sharp teeth, stabbed like needles, and still he couldn't stop." (Chapter 5, p. 60).

"She barely understood what he was saying. Her English was composed of manners and poetry and light, and she had no vocabulary to comprehend such darkness. All she knew was that she had been raised to be sold, and being sold to Ralph was certainly not the worst of her options." (Ibid, p. 64).

"His love died with Emilia, and with the child, but his desire flourished in the barren soil of his heart and its soft whispering never ceased in his ear." (Ibid, p. 66).

"He had believed his mother the way we all believe the people we love when they tell us who we are, believe them because what the beloved says is truth to us ... he told her of his dark and tortured desires, desires his mother had seen before he felt them, seen them in him as a baby, so that she would not pick him up or hold him, even then." (Chapter 7, p. 77.)).

"Something about his candor made her want to run away. She didn't want to know this story. She didn't want to hear the end. It made him too real. She didn't want to think of him as a person. She didn't want to hear his heartbeat." (Ibid, p. 79).

"He knew that she found him sexless, as frozen as the landscape, and he wanted to say, it isn't true, I would give everything I have to see you writhing on this floor, right now, and still he said nothing. He made no gesture that might be interpreted as leaning in to her in the slightest way." (Chapter 8, p. 88).

"The blue bottle fueled her; it was her simple, her only plan. The house would be hers. The pearls, the books and pictures, the fancy rugs from India and the East, and Truitt would be hers, too. But there would be no affection, no ambling toward a sweet old age. One drop. Two drops. That was the future." (Chapter 9, p. 108).

"In the country, there was insanity. There were fires and burnings and murders and rapes, unthinkable cruelties, usually committed by people against people they knew. It was at least personal. Here there was the heartless, sane, anonymous whirl of the desolate modern machinery, the wheels and cogs, cold iron from Truitt's foundry. Here there was appalling poverty and gracelessness. She gave coins to the children. She couldn't look at the mothers." (Ibid, p. 117-18).

"...she knew they had been something to Truitt, some kind of release from his private agony, the opening of a window kept shut for too long. A homecoming. And, as always when she had given pleasure, she was happy to have given it. She knew the cost of solace in this world. She knew its rarity." (Ibid, p. 119).

"She thought of her life, her patchwork quilt of a life, pieced together from castoff scraps of this and that; experience, knowledge, clairvoyance. None if it made any sense to her. She had no knowledge of good. She had no heart and so no sense of the good thing,



the right thing, and she had no field on which to wage the battle that was, in fact, raging in her." (Chapter 13, p. 146).

"She was not what she appeared to be to Ralph Truitt, but she was not what she appeared to be to Tony Moretti either, and she never stopped to wonder which self was her true self and which one was false." (Chapter 14, p. 159).

"He had sex because he was beautiful. It was beauty's burden to be made available. He had sex because there was a moment during the act of love in which he forgot who he was, forgot everything, forgot his father and his mother and his tiny idiot sister, forgot the beatings and the curses that Ralph had hurled against his flesh ... in sex, he ceased thinking and became only being, all movement and pleasure and expertise. He lived in a sexual frenzy because sometimes, afterward, he could sleep for an hour or two." (Ibid, p. 165).

"...she had become the thing Catherine had wanted to save her from; she had become Catherine, only worse, because for Alice there was no reason. It was not a thing she had to do; it was what she wanted. The empty attention of stupid, lonely men. It was beyond thought." (Chapter 15, p. 172).

"...there was survival. There was going on, as she had always gone on, without much joy, against her will, against her instincts, without the stomach for it, but on and on and on, without relief, without release, without a hand to reach out and touch her heart. Without kindness or comfort. But on." (Chapter 16, p. 186).

"He was lost in hope and desire, as lost as he had been in his first days with Emilia. Catherine was everything. She was not a woman; she was a world. She might wound him, she might lie to him, and still he would do anything to hear one word of kindness from her lips, to feel his flesh touch her flesh without humiliation...he was at last waiting for someone whose name was known to him ... she smiled at him, and he knew then that he would die for her." (Chapter 17, p. 191-2).

"He knew that people suddenly woke up one day and reason was gone, all sense of right and wrong, all trust in their own intentions. It happened. The winter was too long. The air was too bleak. The cause was unknowable, the effect unpredictable." (Chapter 18, p. 205).

"The drug's erotic effect would end soon, and the horror would begin, if that was what she wanted. And the fact of it didn't appall him as he thought it should. He wouldn't stop her. He wouldn't save himself. He loved her. He loved her and she wanted him dead, and his son was lost forever to him and that was fine too. That was what his life had led him to. This was what he had lived twenty years of solitude for, to see what would happen, to see how it would all turn out." (Ibid, p. 209).

"A widow in town took strychnine, the poison scalding her blood, the bile spewing from her mouth as she lay on the kitchen floor, a cake cooling on the kitchen table. A young man threw his only daughter down a well and smoked a cigarette as she drowned. Such things happened." (Ibid, p. 211).



"India had spent a lifetime watching other people's lives, looking in shop windows, watching life through the plate glass of her own indifferent looks, and she had noticed everything and stored it away, her only treasure. It was her only furniture of use; her protection against the loneliness that left her and the ugly men and the sad, sad life." (Chapter 20, p. 229).

"She could grieve for herself now, finally, for her wandering, wasted life ... she wept for herself, she wept for her father and her mother, for her sister, and for every moment lost and forgotten and broken into bits on the long way from where she had been to the place where she sat. It was so fragile, a life, and she thought she had been tough enough to believe differently. Now everything was tender to her, tender as a new wound...she was applying medications to her own skin as she was nursing Truitt." (Ibid, p. 236).

"Sons came home to their fathers, even to men who weren't their fathers, men who had beaten them senseless. Sons came home, malevolent with revenge, home to fathers who could not forgive themselves for the cruelties they had committed. Such things happened." (Chapter 21, p. 239).

"She herself had lied, but now it seemed the lie had burned through her, leaving only white blank space behind, white as the landscape outside the window. At that moment, something in her ended and something began. And she lay awake until the thin light came through the windows while she gave birth to the new thing." Ibid, p. 244

"Ralph had found his passion again, so long suppressed. He had found it in a woman who had deceived and lied and pretended and worse, but he woke up every morning with the feeling of having passed the night in dreams of pleasure. He had sought one thing and found another. She was the instrument of his death. She was the invitation to his life. He knew where he stood." (Chapter 22, p. 253).

"His father, his real father, had left his mother for a rich young widow. His father ... had taught piano, was named Moretti, had given him life. This Truitt was a remote stranger whose death was the only thing Antonio had lived for for more than a dozen years. This Truitt who bought and sold and disposed, who spoke to him in kind tones that Antonio could not bear." (Chapter 23, p. 267).

"The air had turned suddenly cold, but it was a springtime kind of cold, an evening cold, without threat. It was almost dark. Things wait, she thought. Not everything dies. Living takes time. And she walked toward the golden house and took his outstretched hand in her own. Such things happen." (Chapter 25, p. 291).



Topics for Discussion

Discuss how the weather and the climate - the blizzard at the beginning, the cold and snowy winter of much of the middle section, and the thaw of the spring as the novel concludes - metaphorically and symbolically reflects the state of being of the various characters.

Discuss how the portrayals of Truitt and Catherine in the first two chapters set up both the conflict to come and the essential similarities between their experiences and their journeys of transformation.

What parallels, similarities, and/or differences are there in the pasts of Catherine and Truitt? In what ways do those pasts have similar effects on the presents of both characters?

What do you think are the reasons and meanings behind the author's portrayal of the similarities between Truitt, Antonio, and Catherine. What do you think he is saying about the nature and function of sexual desire, passion, betrayal, loneliness, and anger?

In what ways does Catherine's changing relationship with the truth reflect and manifest changes in her character? In what ways does Truitt's relationship with Catherine's truths reflect and/or manifest the changes in his?"

Discuss the different ways Catherine's clothes and what happens to them (i.e. her dress being savaged during Antonio's rape) represent and/or manifest her purpose, her state of being, and/or her intentions.

What is your experience of sexuality? Do you experience it as an opportunity for intimacy and connection, in the way that Truitt and Catherine grow to experience it? Is it, for you, an expression of simple desire? Do you see it as an opportunity to cover up and suppress more troubling feelings, as is the case with Antonio? Should sex, as Truitt's mother seems to have advocated, ever be about anything other than procreation?

Consider circumstances in your life in which the phrase "such things happen" might apply such as a coincidence, an unlikely choice, and a surprising action, either positive or negative, taken by someone. Did it feel like you were struggling to explain the unexplainable, or the unlikely? Did it feel like "such things happen" was the only possible explanation? Did meaning of that incident become clear after the fact?

What is your experience of isolation? Is it physical, moral, emotional, and/or sexual? How did that isolation come about? Was it chosen or was it imposed upon you? What effect did that isolation have on you? If negative, how did you get past it? If positive, how did you build upon it?

What do you think the book's title means? Is it ironic or literal?