

# **The Recognitions Study Guide**

## **The Recognitions by William Gaddis**

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# Plot Summary

In this sprawling and largely-forgotten novel of 1952, author William Gaddis takes as his theme the fake, the flaky, the fraudulent, and the phony in religion, the art world, academia and every nook and cranny he can put under his satirical microscope. In its scope, the novel is as broad as Balzac, as beat as Kerouac, and as rhapsodic as Thomas Wolfe. The characters, an always-changing stream of individual egos pitted against an absurd world, are by turns funny, desperate, deluded, and myopic. Gaddis bites off a huge chunk of the world but does a masterful job of breaking it down for the reader so that in its particulars, the human comedy unfolds in all of its compulsive reactions to fear in a post-war nuclear age. By carefully excavating all the manifestations of fear on human behavior, Gaddis succeeds in showing the reader how corrosive the need to adopt a mask or persona is to spiritual integrity.

The story unfolds largely through the lives of expatriate Americans living in Europe. These include artists, writers, musicians, forgers, and Catholic priests, all of whom are afflicted with various levels of delusional thinking that they identify as their own search for truth and their own unique identity. Their universal problem is the ego, which does not yield them the satisfaction or serenity they seek. Some seek release from this frustration in drug addiction and a bohemian lifestyle while others find their release through efforts to control others. Ultimately they are all living in a hell of their own creation, serving life sentences locked in the prison of their own egos.

The art counterfeiter and the forger convince themselves they are great artists because of the skill with which they produce fakes. At least one artist finds in heroin addiction an empty substitute for the love and recognition she is denied. A priest uses the internecine layers of authority and protocol in the Catholic church to avoid facing his own mortality and powerlessness. Other minor characters try control, dominance, or physical escape to avoid facing the duplicity of their lives.

In many ways, this 1950s novel is a bell weather of social changes during the Cold War that would come to fruition in the 1960s. The underlying angst of the characters is clearly identifiable as fear. This is the kind of fear that drove school children under their desks in simulated nuclear attacks and that produced alternative lifestyles as a way of saying no to "the establishment" with its foreign wars, intercontinental ballistic missiles, and lockstep corporate conformity. These are characters spawned in the Beat Generation that would later become the spiritual antecedents of the Dropout Generation. In its search for authenticity, this generation must face its own delusions and contradictions while it also faces those of the world, as William Gaddis makes plain in this work.



# Part One, Chapter One

## Part One, Chapter One Summary

Camilla Gwyon, wife of the 49-year-old Reverend Gwyon, dies unexpectedly of appendicitis while the couple is on a steamship journey to Europe. Gwyon refuses to allow burial at sea, so he arranges for a casket and burial in the small Spanish town of San Zwingli. Upon his dejected return to Boston, Gwyon becomes the object of scorn by his Aunt May who resents the fact that Camilla has been buried in a faraway place amidst Catholics. In later years, Gwyon revisits Spain and stays in a Franciscan monastery long enough to sense the frustration and unhappiness of the monks. After a short visit, he is sent by wagon to Madrid. In the passage of Spanish women on the street, he is reminded of his wife's dresses. In the faces of Spanish women, he also sees his departed wife's face. When he returns once more to Boston, his son Wyatt is four years old and already "finding the Christian system suspect." Gwyon keeps a Barbary ape named Heracles in his barn, where he sleeps in an old sleigh with a white rabbit for companionship. Between his father's ethereal mysticism and his aunt's stern, guilt-ridden Christianity, Wyatt secretly develops a loathing for Jesus. The protestant Aunt May gradually withdraws from reality and reads the Bible aloud to herself in her room, taking time out to condemn the Catholic church as "pagan." At the age of 63, the old maid dies an embittered death. Wyatt falls gravely ill and becomes a subject of investigation and experimentation in the hospital. After doctors finally give a Latin name to his condition they send him home to die. Wyatt however recovers and gains back the weight he lost during his illness.

## Part One, Chapter One Analysis

This chapter introduces the recurrent themes of religion, specifically Christianity and authenticity. Reverend Gwyon not only loses his wife but must endure the endless hectoring of his mother for the manner of her burial in Spain. Martyred in his own time, the reverend retreats into his books and religious rituals. His son, Wyatt, finds no comfort and very little authenticity in his father's religion. His almost fatal illness seems more like a psychosomatic ailment than an infectious one. Wyatt makes a stab at divinity school, but drops out because of his disgust with the failings of religion.



## Chapter 2

### Chapter 2 Summary

Wyatt Gwyon studies art in Germany and settles in Paris, where he works afternoons as an art restorer and nights painting his own canvases. Wyatt eschews the cafés and bars where bohemians, prostitutes and other denizens of the Parisian underworld thrive. One day he stumbles, exhausted, back to his one-room flat to find a man waiting outside who introduces himself as Crémer, art critic for the newspaper. Crémer tells Wyatt they met previously at an art gallery and that he is interested in seeing some of his recent work. Wyatt invites him inside, where Crémer tells him that he would like to write a favorable review of his work but doesn't really need to see it. He insinuates that being an art critic doesn't pay well, but that he can help Wyatt if Wyatt agrees to give him 10 percent of any sales that result from his review. Wyatt becomes enraged and throws Crémer out of his apartment. Then Wyatt reads in an art publication that his show at the gallery has been canceled with no pictures sold. He also reads a review by Crémer that characterizes his work as "archaic, derivative, without heart or sympathy, devoid of life." Meanwhile a prostitute plies her trade among all the monuments and memories of faded French imperialism and life surges forward in the City of Light.

### Chapter 2 Analysis

As an adult who has thrown off the shackles of religiosity in search of truth, Wyatt Gwyon finds his true calling as an artist. He is soon immersed, however, in the cutthroat business of the cannibalistic art world by his encounter with a corrupt art critic. Refusing to pay for a favorable review of his gallery exhibit, Gwyon finds his work panned, ridiculed and rejected. None of his canvasses have sold when the exhibit is canceled. The corruption and dishonesty in the church that Wyatt fled thrives also in the world of art, which he naively assumes will offer freedom and integrity of expression.



# Chapter 3

## Chapter 3 Summary

Wyatt marries a sensual woman named Esther and they share a house in Greenwich Village. Wyatt is frequently lost in his books and study, which irritates his wife, when he is not working as an art restorer. They have uninspired sex and when Esther awakens the next morning, she realizes she has been alone most of the night. Wyatt has spent another night working on a canvas and she tries to goad him into producing "something original." They receive a letter from a warehouse in New Jersey where Wyatt stores his paintings, informing them that all his works have been destroyed in a fire and offering him a check for \$130. Wyatt is pleased but Esther outraged that he is so poorly compensated. Still trying to get a rise out of Wyatt, Esther asks him whether he knows that a young poet he traveled with in Germany was homosexual. Wyatt ignores her and continues with his work and they have perfunctory sex after dinner. Esther meets a man named Otto in a round of Christmas parties, becomes fascinated with him, and later asks her husband if Otto is homosexual. At a flamenco bar, they share a bottle of wine and Esther tells him she comes there occasionally because she can talk to the patrons about her writing, which she tells Wyatt she is not comfortable discussing with him.

Wyatt takes an inebriated Esther by the hand to head for home, when they encounter an old friend of Wyatt from his divinity school days. Esther sways. As they resume walking, she demands belligerently to know why Wyatt married her. The next day Esther has coffee with Otto and asks him whether he likes Wyatt. He answers yes but says he is hard to get to know. As they walk down the sidewalk, Otto stops and pulls out a piece of paper and scribbles. "Christ, Otto, what are you doing?" Esther says. He replies that he is working on a play.

"A play? Christ, how unnecessary," she says. Later, Otto finds it difficult to hold a conversation with Esther about books and philosophers. One afternoon when Wyatt and Esther are together, a stranger knocks on their door and inveigles himself inside, standing in the middle of the room. "My name is Recktall Brown," he says. Brown asks if Wyatt is an artist, and he replies that he does restorations. Brown asks him, "Do you want to tell me you can do more than patch old pictures?" Brown asks Wyatt what he would do if, when restoring a painting, he discovers under that painting an original work by one of the masters worth tens of thousands of dollars. Otto returns from working on a banana plantation in South America, visits Esther and has sex with her.

## Chapter 3 Analysis

Wyatt marries Esther and quickly abandons her emotionally just as his father has abandoned Wyatt and his mother. In his fervid search for artistic authenticity, Wyatt spends most of the nights not making love to his wife but attending to his paintings. Wyatt's encounter with the art hustler Recktall Brown leaves a bad taste in his mouth,



not unlike his previous encounter with the crooked art critic. Esther, quick to respond to her emotional abandonment, demands that Wyatt explain why he wanted to marry her. Meanwhile Otto, an aspiring writer, becomes friends with Esther before he leaves for a banana plantation where he plans to complete his novel. When he returns to New York, Otto begins a sexual relationship with Esther.





# Chapter 4

## Chapter 4 Summary

In a flashback, Otto prepares to leave the banana plantation and return to the United States. Sitting in his underpants working at his typewriter, Otto hears the loud voice of Jesse, who shirtless and tattoo-covered lets himself into Otto's room where they share a drink, Jesse asks Otto what he's doing and Otto replies he's working on his play. Otto reads a few lines for Jesse's benefit, and Jesse interrupts to tell him a play should be about action, not people holding a conversation. Jesse then proceeds to dictate a play about himself as a tropical he-man who fights, drinks and fucks like a real man. Wearing of Jesse's chest-thumping, Otto goes to bed. When he awakens, he tries on his white Brooks Brothers suit he plans to wear in New York when he tries to peddle his play. Searching for the manuscript, Otto becomes frantic when he can't find it or communicate with the Spanish-speaking maids. Eventually they locate the MS, Otto packs off with his bags and typewriter for the drive to the port and a free ride aboard the company's banana boat. As the boat departs, he smokes a casual cigarette in his cabin and dreams of meeting Esther in New York.

## Chapter 4 Analysis

This chapter is a somewhat confusing flashback in which the reader is carried back in time when Otto is still in South America, preparing for his return trip to New York. It is unclear why the author decided at this early point in the novel to do a quick flashback. As a literary device, the flashback has more potency when it is employed to cover long periods of time. For example, a flashback may hold the clue as to why a character behaves a certain way in the present where links to earlier experiences, even in childhood, can dramatically provide insight into character development. In this instance, there is not much time between the flashback and the present, and very little of Otto's motivation and character is revealed by means of the flashback.



# Chapter 5

## Chapter 5 Summary

New Yorkers drink and gossip, and gossip and drink. Writers compare themselves with other writers, artists with other artists, and psychoanalysts with psychoanalysts. Those who are in none of those categories make painful attempts to appear avant garde at a party to celebrate a painter's completion of his new canvas. "But you've got to understand New York," a bespectacled guest says. "New York is a social experience." Otto appears at the door in his white tropical suit, tanned and healthy. Someone asks why he went to work on a banana plantation in South America, and he responds that he enjoyed the climate and finished his novel that he now must try to sell to a publisher. Otto immediately asks if anyone has seen Esther and is introduced to Agnes Deigh a literary agent and member of the social circle who has recently returned to New York from Puerto Rico. Herschel, who writes for Hollywood gossip magazines, reveals that he doesn't really interview his female subjects but simply invents all kinds of lurid confessional statements, sends it to the star's publicity agent who initials her approval, then submits it for publication. Meanwhile, the party gossip turns darkly homophobic as some guests whisper to each other about the sex lives of their acquaintances, their marriages and even their surgeries. In their drunken attempts to impress one another, some guests indulge in pseudo-intellectual chitchat, with such nonsense as whether one can be a positive negativist or a negative positivist. Otto spies a young woman on the other side of the room and immediately moves toward her. After being delayed by several conversations, he finally reaches her, offers her a cigarette and introduces himself to Esmé. He takes her by the arm and suggests they leave. As they move slowly toward the door, they are showered with imprecations and snide comments. Once outside and on the staircase, "she drew him down."

## Chapter 5 Analysis

The cocktail party, as a social institution, may well have been the 1950s-60s forerunner of the encounter group. However with the cocktail party, alcohol is readily available as a social lubricant that makes the maintenance of masks easier. The brutal honesty of the encounter group is nowhere in evidence at the cocktail party, however. As a literary device, the cocktail party serves well as a setting where a number of characters come together and reveal themselves unwittingly by the masks they wear to cover their own feelings of inferiority or inadequacy. Those who are adept at this social game, such as Agnes Deigh, emerge with the reputation and ranking intact or improved. Thus the artists' cocktail party, in its essential dynamics, is no different than a convocation of realtors, say, or lawyers. The New York artists' cocktail party depicted in this chapter presents a distillation of what is at stake in this novel: the notion that a good fake is better than a poor original. From a sociological point of view, this situation could be read as a mass flight from reality in the time of the Cold War with its imminent threat of nuclear annihilation.



# Chapter 6

## Chapter 6 Summary

Hung over, Otto awakens in his apartment and surveys the damage from the night before: a large smudge on his white linen suit and less money in his wallet. He swats angrily at a fly that dances around the room. Looking at his pale face and puffy eyes in the mirror, Otto cringes when a pneumatic jackhammer opens up its rat-a-tat-tat inferno on the sidewalk below. He rides the bus to Esmé's apartment and knocks. She shouts through the door for him to come back in an hour after she's had a bath. Otto eats breakfast at a lunch counter then passes his friend Stanley on the street without stopping to speak. When he returns he asks Esmé how she is feeling and whether she remembers anything from the party the night before. She doesn't remember that Otto brought her home. There is a knock on the door and Esmé lets Chaby inside. He is a dark and greasy young man with a slicked-down pompadour that he continually combs with a dirty comb. His shirt is open to the waist and a silver medallion dangles from his neck on his hairy chest. Esmé and Chaby dance a tango to music on the radio. She informs Otto that Chaby is a dance instructor. Otto chuffs a cigar and watches the tango with grim indifference. He leaves in a huff and tries calling other friends from a phone booth, without success. Otto finds a bar where he can medicate his resentment, then takes the bus again back to Esmé's apartment. He tells Esmé he may soon be returning to Bolivia and Peru. Esmé says that sounds like a silly idea. Otto counters that spending her time with "half-wits" like Chaby is even sillier. She says Chaby is a drug addict as a result of morphine he received during the war. They go to bed and he admires her slim body. In the communal bathroom, a small cockroach jumps off the toilet paper roll and Otto flushes it down the toilet.

## Chapter 6 Analysis

Sexual tension between Otto and Esmé reaches a breaking point with the arrival of the drug addict Chaby, and the clear implication that she may be sleeping with two men. Otto's middle class origins reveal themselves when, confronted with what amounts to the beginnings of the sexual revolution, he balks and "blows his cool." Childishly he tells Esmé he may be soon leaving for another trip to Central America. This sort of infantile baiting probably reflects an unresolved Oedipus complex that keeps Otto from having a mature relationship with a woman. As far as Esmé is concerned, her addiction probably keeps her from having an adult relationship with a man and so she fills the emotional gaps in her life by being with another addict who is similarly frozen

in his emotions. This triad relationship calls to mind the Greenwich Village-hipster cartoons of Jules Pfreiffer, where inability to connect with another person is endemic.



# Chapter 7

## Chapter 7 Summary

Fuller, the Caribbean servant and part-time art forger to Recktail Brown, pauses while walking the French poodle in Central Park to observe the haughty white people parading around in their best gold jewelry. He disdainfully opens his mouth a bit to show the gold mine in his teeth more bounteous than anyone could ever wear on their necks, ankles or fingers. On the return trip home, Fuller runs into an old black friend who is a mortician. The undertaker asks Fuller if he wants some floral arrangements from a recent funeral, but Fuller refuses saying that his boss recently had a fit and demanded that he bring no more "corpse flowers" into his house. Fuller shrugs and tells his friend he is soon to return to Barbados. When he returns home Fuller is met with a verbal assault from Brown, who orders him to serve drinks then go to bed. He demands that Fuller give him the ticket he purchased to Utica, N.Y. in the mistaken notion that a trip to anywhere will get him closer to Barbados. Basil Valentine pays a visit to Recktail Brown, telling him he wants to meet the artist who paints clever forgeries of valuable old canvases. He peruses *Collectors Quarterly* while sipping a whiskey. Brown puffs on his cigar and tells Valentine he's come into possession of an original masterpiece from Germany. Valentine also challenges the authenticity of the painting. Brown replies that he has tons of authenticating paperwork on the painting. Valentine tells Brown about art dealers who questioned the authenticity of a *di Credi* painting belonging to a wealthy and powerful man who then sued the critics for slander. Finally, Valentine tells Brown the reason for his visit is to ask the forger about a project he has in mind. Valentine observes that if the public believes a painting is by Raphael and is willing to pay the cost of a Raphael, "then it is a Raphael." Valentine and Brown get into an argument about art forgeries. Valentine calls them "calumny" and Brown maintains that even a well-wrought forgery can be a work of art.

## Chapter 7 Analysis

In his own way, Fuller also seeks the authenticity that New Yorkers seek with such fervor that they become unreal. Although he does not define his need to escape from New York and his employer, Recktail Brown, as a quest for truth, he is aware that by returning to his native Barbados he will be closer to his roots and family. Fuller senses that he is being used for some underhanded purpose although he can't quite define it as frank forgery. But Fuller wants his freedom and is willing to go to any length to get it, even, comically, trying to take a train ride to Utica, thinking that this will further him in his journey home. Fuller stands in direct contrast to his employer and other phonies in the art world who are cynically untroubled by their business in forgeries.



# Part 2, Chapter 1

## Part 2, Chapter 1 Summary

A subterranean commuter who resembles the tepid J. Alfred Prufrock in the poem of that name by T.S. Eliot (Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock), Mr. Pivner, makes his way home to his New York apartment through city streets and crowds. In his lonesome abode, he unwraps a syringe and sits down to read the salacious newspaper headlines before injecting himself with insulin for his diabetes. He stares blankly at a brief letter he has read and reread many times. He quickly calculates both his financial and chemical worth, which comes to \$105,720 and 97 cents, respectively. Agnes Deigh lights a cigarette and crumples up a newspaper clipping reporting the trial of a woman in Missouri named Agnes Day, accused of stabbing her husband to death. A friend had sent it to her as a joke. Obviously, she is not amused. Agnes takes out her pill box and puts a tablet in her mouth, then waters a plant in her office. Otto appears and asks if he can see Agnes about his play. Distracted by a letter from the War Department informing her of her brother's death, Agnes tells Otto she likes his play but that something about it seems oddly familiar. Upset by the letter, Agnes throws on her coat and hat and leads Otto to a bar where she downs a martini.

Esmé puts a "do not disturb" sign on her apartment door and struggles with a poem she is trying to write. She gets lost in her thoughts as she sifts through the fogs of her memory, then lights a lamp over which she holds a teaspoon of heroin to liquefy it before injection. Just then, Chaby pounds on her door. She answers it and lets him inside, where he immediately pushes her down for sex. Otto walks toward Esmé's apartment, stopping along the way to compliment Reckall Brown's servant, Fuller, on the black poodle he is walking. Otto drags himself upstairs to Esmé's door and finds himself with both her and Chaby. Nonchalantly, he suggests they go out to dinner together where he sulks. While she is changing her dress, Otto tries to get his hands around Esmé but she chastises him. At the restaurant, Otto encounters his friend Max to whom he has given a copy of his play, "The Vanity of Time." Otto asks Max what he thinks of the work. Max replies hesitantly that something about the play seems very familiar. Otto says Max is accusing him of plagiarism, grabs his copy of the manuscript and angrily shoves it inside his briefcase. When he hears that his former lover Esther is back in town, Otto excuses himself and calls to arrange a rendezvous. When he returns, they decide to go to a queer drag party which Otto finds uplifting in its worship of life that is "religious in the sense of devotion, adoration, celebration of deity, before religion became confused with systems of ethics and morality."

Otto and Ed Feasley escape the party and head at 73 m.p.h. toward Connecticut. Feasley suddenly executes a 180-degree turn, accompanied by squealing tires and a glancing impact with a lamp post. "I want to see how fast I can make that ramp around Grand Central," Feasley announces with abandon. Suddenly he stops the car and says he's always wanted to pat a corpse on the head. They sneak into the morgue of a hospital, pat some corpses on their cold heads, and Otto makes off with a disembodied



leg, "a woman's, quite old, slightly blackened around some of the toes and its detached end neatly bound with tape." Drunk at dawn, they throw the leg into Feasley's car and take off again at a high rate of speed. Stanley awakens very early in the midst of an anxiety attack. Hannah knocks on his door and asks if she can sleep in his chair. He tells her to get into bed because he is going out. Otto and Ed Feasley approach Stanley's apartment with the leg. They break into the apartment and Hannah asks them what they're doing. Otto and Ed make a quick apology and retreat with the leg. They put it back in the speeding car and Ed crashes head-on into a pole. They leave the car and board a subway, still carrying the leg. Otto leaves the leg on the subway as they disembark.

## Part 2, Chapter 1 Analysis

Otto is offended when literary agent Agnes Deigh suggests that his play seems remotely familiar, if not word-for-word then in its overall artistic framework. To cover her own apprehension, she invites Otto out for a martini. Later, Otto asks his friend Max his opinion of "The Vanity of Time" and essentially gets the same reaction. The discomfort involved in recognitions about Otto's play is a threat to everyone involved. If one writer's work can be so transparently derivative, then everyone else who is to some extent a fake runs the same risk of exposure. Otto reacts to both situations with anger, which is based in fear. Then Otto and Ed Feasley come up with the drunken notion to steal a cadaver leg and place it in Stanley's bed. Although this episode is hilarious, it also starkly reveals the aggression they feel toward Stanley, who is one of the few truly creative artists in this ingrown circle of aspiring artists.



## Chapter 2

### Chapter 2 Summary

Otto visits literary agent Recktall Brown to ask about his play manuscript that he's submitted. Brown, rummaging around, can't find the MS but tells Otto it feel to him as if the novel is derivative if not an outright instance of plagiarism. Otto, offended and set off balance, goes down to the street with his head swirling. Brown then meets with aspiring writer named Basil Valentine, and tells him essentially he same thing about his MS. Valentine tells Brown that he knows about his art forgeries, and threatens to expose him. The Rev. Gilbert Sullivan pays a visit to Valentine, telling him he needs to hear some good music and have a drink. They share cigars, music and drinks while the Jesuit priest rants and raves about the exponentially exploding world population, philosophy, love and romance, and the preparation of mummies. Sullivan condemns the modern world as nothing more than a reprise of the corrupt world of ancient Rome. Valentine gets sick and tries to keep from vomiting.

### Chapter 2 Analysis

The cannibalistic nature of relationships in the novel's circle of characters is revealed once again when Otto goes to Recktall Brown to ask his opinion of his play. Again Otto is confronted with doubts and suspicions about the authenticity of his work. Another aspiring writer gets the same rejection, but retaliates by telling Brown he's aware of his art forgeries and threatens to reveal his criminal activity. At this point, the reader is aware that the deeper motivations of people in the professional art world are just as base and mendacious as those of anyone on Wall Street or in Washington, D.C. The lust for fame and fortune spawns blackmail, intrigue, and manipulation. Valentine, already miffed at his encounter with Recktall Brown, tries to blunt his anger by having drinks with a priest who complains that contemporary America is every bit as venal and debauched as the Roman empire, and who yearns for a restoration of decency, honesty and virtue. Valentine, confronted again with his own inadequacies after a few drinks, becomes nauseous. Apparently, The Rev. Gilbert Sullivan has hit the nail squarely on the head.



# Chapter 3

## Chapter 3 Summary

A good deal of stream-of-consciousness from Reverend Gwyon fills this long chapter and brings the reader inside his claustrophobic insular world of arcane ancient history, Bible scholarship and secondhand suppositions about how the world works. Most of this interior monologue jumps back and forth through time and space, dreamlike, and the reader is challenged to sift through a small universe of people, living and dead, with whom Gwyon interacts inside his head. The only real, substantive characters in Reverend Gwyon's Alice-in-Wonderland consciousness are the town carpenter who comes to do some repairs on his spacious home and Janet, the housekeeper, in the small New England town that is his family's native ground. Gwyon's interior world is interrupted by a knock on the door and the announcement by Janet that a group of church women has arrived to see him. Gwyon runs to his study and bolts himself inside. In his frustration and anger, he throws books, including the Bible, on the floor. Once the women get tired of waiting and leave, Gwyon runs into the barn in the midst of a thunderstorm to check on the bull and is struck but not killed by lightning. The town carpenter comes to his rescue, takes him inside the house and cleans him up. Delirious, Gwyon goes to the Depot Tavern to await the train to New York, where he hopes to see Rectall Brown. Inebriated, he barely makes it inside the train and when he reaches the city, he goes to Brown's home where he encounters Fuller, all packed and ready to leave for Barbados. Fuller tells Gwyon that Brown took away his train ticket and won't be back until the next day.

## Chapter 3 Analysis

Absurdities of all kinds bring a tragicomic theme to the story. The Reverend Gwyon discovers that his ivory tower existence is not sacrosanct when a group of church women descend upon his house and, suggestive of T.S. Elliot's "Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," spend their time waiting to confront the cowering clergyman. ("In the drawing room the women come and go, Talking of Michelangelo," is how Elliot describes this sort of passive-aggressive behavior.) This image may well be intended as a metaphor for the impotency of the church in dealing with modern issues and concerns. Ossified in its traditions and practices, the modern Christian church has failed to respond to contemporary spiritual needs and thus has contributed to the growing gulf between church and humanity. Once the threat of the women has passed, Gwyon continues his flight by boarding a train for New York City.





# Chapter 4

## Chapter 4 Summary

"You can only be faithful to people one at a time," Esmé tells Otto at a breakfast counter where he finds her munching toast. Otto is suspicious about her relationship with Chaby and several other men. He asks Esmé why she is so beautiful and tells her he loves her. She answers that he does not love her because he does not know her. He loves only his image of her. Otto tells her a story about a forged Titian canvas that was discovered. When the forgery was found, it was scraped off to reveal a very mediocre painting in an old frame. When that was scraped off they found a genuine Titian masterpiece, Otto says, an analogy for getting to know someone intimately. Otto tells Esmé he wants to marry her to "save her" from her helter-skelter life. She replies that she does not want to be saved and walks away.

Otto runs into Stanley and Anselm on the street, and they sit down together. Anselm asks Otto if he wants to go into the artificial insemination business with them: they will advertise to women who want to be inseminated by famous movie stars. "I fill the barrels and Stanley peddles them," Anselm proudly announces. Otto tells them they are both crazy. At a bar, the men compare philosophies on art, women, fakery. Stanley tells Otto that Esmé tried the previous night to kill herself by turning on the gas in her apartment. Otto hurries to Esmé's and is greeted once again by the addict Chaby. Otto tries to take Esmé for a walk and asks her if she's OK. Speaking of herself in the third person, Esmé says she did something foolish the night before by turning on the gas "when the bill was so high already." They take a walk in the Christmas chill and Esmé pulls away from him once again. After a few drinks at a bar, Otto goes into a phone booth and calls the police to report the use of heroin at Esmé's address. He declines to provide his name.

## Chapter 4 Analysis

Otto brushes off a grand fraudulent scheme by his friends Anselm and Stanley to open an artificial insemination bank offering the sperm of movie stars and famous people, but actually providing only the seed of Anselm. In a fit of paternalistic protectiveness, Otto tells Esmé he wants to marry her to save her from her path toward self-destruction involving heroin and a suicide attempt. In classical addict behavior, Esmé refuses any help and returns to her addict boyfriend. Esmé seems to relish her adopted persona of the tormented, damned artist and it is difficult to discern whether this attitude is the result of her heroin addiction, or whether her addiction is the result of her embrace of the aesthetics of suicide. Either way, it is apparent to Otto that she is a sick woman who needs help. His final attempt to help involves telling the police about her illicit drug use. In truth, this may be the only thing that will grab her attention and shock her into seeing the direction her life is headed.



# Chapter 5

## Chapter 5 Summary

Mr. and Mrs. Frank Sinisterra are involved in a knock-down-drag-out battle. She is angry at him for telling her he is a Catholic when he is only an ex-con counterfeiter. Shrugging, he tells her not to touch his latest production of a mass of freshly-printed dollar bills hanging in their apartment to dry. Sinisterra tells his wife about the high quality of his engravings and bills, that she should be proud that he is such a skilled craftsman. Sinisterra always carries a copy of National Counterfeit Detector to see if any of his latest bills have been featured. The miserable Mr. Pivner returns to his empty apartment, breaks a bottle of insulin so he cannot inject himself, and reads self-help books. Otto drinks in a bar and hits on a woman named Jean. He tries to get a room but can't secure one until he has his baggage, and he can't get his baggage until he gets a room. He returns to the bar and notices Jean talking to another man. A man sitting near him strikes up a conversation and tells Otto his latest job is making a counterfeit passport. Otto realizes the man is his father. By now intoxicated, Otto sees Max in the bar and tells him that he has sold his play.

## Chapter 5 Analysis

If there is honor among thieves, there are artistic standards for counterfeiters as Mrs. Frank Sinisterra learns after a fight with her husband. She becomes enraged that he lied to her that he is a Catholic when he is just an ex-convict. Far beyond the societal strictures of right and wrong, Sinisterra counters his wife's rage with pride about his workmanship. He seems incapable of understanding that lying to his wife is just another form of dishonesty, not unlike producing counterfeit bills regardless of their artistic quality. Strangely, Otto encounters his estranged father in a bar as he seeks customers for his fake passport business. The reader may wonder at this point whether counterfeiting and plagiarism run in this family. Both are seen shown as hopelessly deluded activities practiced by truly desperate men.



# Chapter 6

## Chapter 6 Summary

Basil Valentine and Fuller visit the zoo to watch the animals pacing around and freezing in the cold winter. Valentine asks if Fuller can give him one of his art forgeries that he made for Reckall Brown before quitting and burning the rest. Fuller tells him all the paintings are destroyed. Agnes Deigh returns in a late afternoon snow to her apartment to find Army ("the Swede") asleep under a sunlamp. She wakes him and tells him he has probably got bad burns and they go outside into the snow in search of a doctor. Before leaving however, she begins to draft a letter of apology to a dentist neighbor for filing a false statement with the police that he was abusing a patient. Mr. Pivner scans the scandalous headlines, reads the instructions to a paint-by-numbers kit, then goes to a Christmas Eve bar and orders orange juice while he witnesses a furtive exchange of money between a blonde customer and the bartender.

## Chapter 6 Analysis

Absurdities continue as Valentine tries to get Fuller, Reckall Brown's servant/art forger, to give him a forgery that doesn't exist. The milquetoast Mr. Pivner executes a paint-by-numbers picture and drinks orange juice as Christmas approaches. These random scenarios form slices of life that give the novel texture and weave the background against which these clever art predators operate.



# Chapter 7

## Chapter 7 Summary

In this meandering chapter that plunges into and out of several characters' consciousnesses, it becomes apparent that there is no real plot for this novel because there is no real purpose to the characters' lives. They are narcissistically obsessed with themselves, their appearance to others, and their social ranking within the artistic firmament to nurture other, grander ambitions that might bring them into dramatic encounters with fate and other people. They express their frustrations by lashing out at their peers rather than by taking direct action to change their circumstances, or to overcome adversity in a somewhat heroic fashion, which might feed a standard plot line. In this long chapter, the characters seem bored with themselves and with others. It is therefore inevitable that the reader might feel claustrophobic in the midst of this marathon Christmas party at Basil Valentine's flat. As a bit of tragicomic relief, the revelry is interrupted by a young girl from the apartment below who shows up at the door asking for sleeping pills for her mother. In keeping with the spirit of the season, these bohemian swells employ such phrases as "dumb bastard," "stupid kid," "spare prick," and "addict" in referring to one another. Some of those in attendance include Otto, Esther, Herschel, Stanley, Benny, Agnes Deigh, Ed Feasly, Anselm, and Mr. Feddle.

## Chapter 7 Analysis

This pivotal chapter presents a dilemma for the author: how to construct a compelling narrative about characters who are essentially uninteresting because of their superficiality. Artistic integrity on the part of the author, a central theme of the novel, demands that he be forthright about his characters. Their lack of purpose other than social climbing and producing fake art works and fake personas does not lend itself to the traditional problem-crisis-growth-resolution framework. The ultimate metaphor for this sense of futility is a long and long-winded cocktail party that gives everyone a chance to refine their deceptive skills.



# Chapter 8

## Chapter 8 Summary

The party grinds on into the night, for 50 pages, as the guests try to impress each other with their intellect and charm but descend into alcoholic chaos as "the voices of guests lay in monotonous layers on the pestilential heat, rising into the lighted regions, falling away to the dark beds of shifting infested silence. Mr. Schmuck of 20th Century Schmuck joins the party and talks about German composers. The voices of guests and their conversations intersect and collide randomly, as is usually the case at a cocktail party. Someone asks Recktail Brown which is the most beautiful piece of art in his collection. Brown throws a hand up in a gesture of quandary and smacks Basil Valentine square in the face. As Valentine holds a handkerchief to his bleeding nose, and beckons his listeners to follow him into another room. What follows is a series of drunks bumping into doors and into each other. Finally, Valentine collides with Fuller and calls him "idiot." Fuller then slips away and escapes from the party. Meanwhile several guests, including a bearded art critic, begin speaking in French. Basil Valentine drops to one knee and tries to repair his suit of armor that has been knocked out of joint by the random bumping and rubbing of his guests. Fuller returns briefly with his bags packed and says he's taking a vacation "from all the years of bondage." Stanley, agitated, tells Otto that he has been arrested by the police for using a counterfeit \$20 bill that Otto gave him. Otto asks if anyone knows where where Esmé is, then goes outside and falls down on the ice.

## Chapter 8 Analysis

The author grinds out another 50 pages of this excruciatingly tiresome party. It is as if he hoped to induce in his readers the kind of ennui and mind-numbing repetition of a social gathering, so it would be as real for the reader as the overfull ash trays and sticky spilled drinks at an actual cocktail party. It is difficult to trudge through this portion of the novel without wondering whether the author himself has fallen victim to the aimlessness that seems to afflict the characters he writes about.



# Chapter 9

## Chapter 9 Summary

The Rev. "Dick" Gwyon is the subject of much gossip about his background in the Depot Tavern as he prepares to deliver Christmas services. As repairs on the broken-down church proceed slowly, Gwyon settles into his pastoral study. In an effort to fit into the community, Gwyon also sings and coaches a Boy Scout troop. Happymount, the local old age home, is within the jurisdiction of The Reverend Gwyon. One resident is an anatomist called Mr. Farisy who conducts gruesome experiments with dismembered cadaverous arms which he nails on the wall and tests for their tensile strength in an effort to understand the means, methods and outcomes of the crucifixion of Jesus. Gwyon wins the approval of his parishioners with his restoration work in the church, but they remain skeptical of his cigar chomping. He undertakes any number of projects to lighten up the parsonage that has "an atmosphere of bereavement." After he delivers his sermon, The Reverend Gwyon feels that it's not one of his best. Finally, he moves to another cottage on the premises because it feels more hopeful.

## Chapter 9 Analysis

The beleaguered Reverend Gwyon can not escape the viscous tongues of his congregation or the towns people who are curious about his comings and goings. Gwyon, at least, can comfort himself with the knowledge that his best hours and days are devoted to the church and to humanitarian projects such as Boy Scouts and he local retirement home. Despite his best efforts, Gwyon can't do much to impress his parishioners or to relieve his own boredom and depression.



## Part 3, Chapter 1

### Part 3, Chapter 1 Summary

On a flight to Panama, Otto is carried to the Central American port of Tribeiza de Dios. Before reaching that stopoff point, Otto eyes his plane warily in New Orleans and decides that one of its wings is bent. He swallows his fear and soars up into the clouds, where he becomes concerned about the tail assembly. Suddenly, the plane lands on the beach at Tribeiza where a freezing passenger is lifted from the tail assembly where he has clung for an inordinate amount of time. As Otto makes his way toward Central America in the rickety plane, Fuller travels aboard the *Island Trader*, an old ocean yacht, through the Caribbean Sea toward Barbados. Otto's plan puts down just in time for the revolution, where it is difficult to know whether the local police are on the side of the loyalists or the revolutionaries. As gunfire rings out in Tribeiza, Otto makes a run for cover toward a church but is grabbed by a cop who throws him to the pavement where he loses consciousness. When he regains consciousness, he is in a cot in an old school that serves as a hospital. The doctor tells him he has suffered a concussion with loss of hearing, as well as a broken arm. The doctor tells Otto to cover his head and moan if anyone comes in, and leaves for the fruit company dispensary to get pain killers.

### Part 3, Chapter 1 Analysis

The third section of the novel gives a bird's eye view of the action on several fronts. Otto's forced landing on the beach at Tribeiza de Dios, Fuller's slow progress toward Barbados aboard a retrofitted ocean yacht, and finally Otto's injuries by police in Tribeizuza during a revolution. Randomness and the chaos of the world suffuse this chapter and tend to revive the sense of utter powerlessness that Otto feels in New York. Any fantasies about writing in a tropical paradise, calmly free from the hurly-burly of urban survival, that Otto entertained regarding his move back to Central America are shattered along with his skull in this encounter.



## Chapter 2

### Chapter 2 Summary

Crass television executives ponder the potential popularity of a new program, *Lives of the Saints*, as news of an attempted suicide reaches the TV station. Crews are pulled from the studio to cover what one executive calls "a jump" as the sound track of a fatuous TV ad rolls in the background. At the scene of the jump, reporters with flashbulbs swarm like flies around a carcass, but the woman, discovered breathing, survives and is carried off to the hospital. She is a Hawaiian woman called Huki-lau who jettisoned herself from a hotel window. Morning mail is delayed because the falling body struck the mailman. Shocked and sickened, one newspaper reporter returns to the newsroom to write his story. The city editor becomes enraged when the reporter realizes he left the name of the woman's doctor at the scene. "You stupid stupid bastard," the editor says.

As Mr. Pivner watches the gruesome details of the attempted suicide on TV, Secret Service agents come to arrest him. One looks at his bathrobe and, seeing the label, says: "You're going to tell us you didn't know this was paid for with queer money?" In a bar, Hannah tells Stanley that his girlfriend with the white fingernails jumped out a window. Stanley tells Agnes Deigh that he is planning a trip to Europe with money his mother left him. Agnes gets a letter from an insurance company that she will receive \$25,000 in benefits after the death of her husband in Hollywood, from falling drunk off a barstool. Stanley boards a boat filled with "pilgrims" on a spiritual quest with a stowaway woman in his cabin.

### Chapter 2 Analysis

The story line jumps jaggedly from character to character and place to place in this chapter as if the author intended to create a state of synesthesia in the reader. This is an effective way of establishing the furtive nature of TV news coverage and, in its earliest days, the complete lack of professionalism. The reader sees a television producer sending a news crew to cover an attempted suicide jump, which is a humdrum event that gains attention only because of its potential excitement factor. And for sheer unpredictability, a thuggish pair of police arrest the gentle Mr. Pivner on grounds he has some "queer money." These are both signs of the sinking literacy of Americans as well as the paranoia of the age.





## Chapter 3

### Chapter 3 Summary

Mr. Yak arrives by train in San Zwingli, Spain where he befriends a man named Stephan who explains the process of mummification as they drink at a bar. The next day, the two go to the local cemetery and exhume a recently buried woman. They place her in a thick layer of black veils and board another train for Madrid. As they travel, the two men act out a pantomime of conversing with the corpse so that people passing their compartment will not become suspicious. At one point the conductor comes to collect three tickets without noticing anything amiss. Once in Madrid, they carry the corpse past Spanish police slowly, as if helping a very old person to move. Once the corpse is safely ensconced within Mr. Yak's apartment. As previously instructed by Stephan, Mr. Yak inserts a sharp knife blade into the side of the corpse so as to remove the internal organs, without the heart. However, his knife strikes something hard and he stops, puzzled.

### Chapter 3 Analysis

Another hilarious scene ensues when two men interested in mummification steal a corpse from the cemetery at San Zwingli, cover it with a black shroud, and try to pass it off as an elderly woman who they are helping to walk, ride the train, and otherwise go about her business. This blatant deception is flawlessly executed so that the mysterious Mr. Yak can take the corpse to his apartment, cut it open and remove the internal organs, as prescribed in the mummification process. No reason for this bizarre behavior is given, and it only makes sense in the context of presenting the reader with another form of fakery.



# Chapter 4

## Chapter 4 Summary

Stanley boards a ship filled with pilgrims on a trip to see the pope, including Father Martin and the woman who made an attempted suicide jump. His female stowaway goes unnoticed as the ship plunges up and down in rough waters, making most passengers seasick. Stanley gets into an argument with the woman as the ship pitches violently from side to side. In anger, he shoves her and she falls against the steel bulkhead, which drives her crucifix into her shoulder. In a panic, Stanley gets a cold damp wash cloth and places it to her head. She opens her eyes as he removes the crucifix. She takes it and throws it at him telling him she wants no part of his "terrible little man with nails in him." Stanley gets her to take two sleeping pills and he listens to her breathing as their ship heads through the darkness to Gibraltar.

In the morning, Stanley awakens and finds her gone. He races out to find her before she might jump. He finds her standing near the railing, gazing down at the sparkling sea below. She rushes to him, and they return to the cabin. Early the next morning, Stanley is awakened by the cold hands of a Scandinavian nurse pinning him down on the bed and giving him a rectal suppository of nembutal sodium, a barbiturate, while she tells him to rest after his ordeal of trying to leap into the sea. "But you...but you," Stanley sputters. He asks where they are, and he is told Naples. Then Stanley becomes agitated, saying he has to get off the ship in Naples.

## Chapter 4 Analysis

Stanley's heightening sense of panic becomes apparent on his ocean voyage with a ship full of pilgrims to Rome. When he loses his temper and strikes his stowaway woman friend and injures her, Stanley comes closer to panic. His near-psychotic condition is brought under control with a rectal suppository of nembutal. The scene with the large Scandinavian nurse sitting on Stanley and inserting the suppository may be a metaphor for the crushing effect of society as it seeks to enforce its norms on anyone who seems to challenge them. The humiliation of having a sedative placed in his rectum agitates Stanley even more as he grows anxious to get off the ship. In a sense, the ship too could be a metaphor for the journey through life we all make whether we like the company or not.



# Chapter 5

## Chapter 5 Summary

On his first day in Rome Stanley is sprayed with green paint and has a finger broken by police when the group of pilgrims, visiting the Basilica of Saint John, is mistaken for a band of political protesters. At the hospital where he is treated, Stanley calls Agnes Deigh and she sends her chauffeur to pick him up in a Daimler and bring him to her residence. While admiring her collection of art masterpieces, Stanley admits that his first love is music and that he's composed a work for the organ that, in an earlier age, might have been called a requiem mass. Mrs. Deigh suggests that he might want to perform the piece on the American organ in the church at Fenestrula. Excited at that prospect, Stanley follows a tourist guide to all the religious sites in Rome. Mrs. Deigh offers to take him to Fenestrula to meet Cardinal Spermelli who can grant permission to play the organ. Stanley asks if the driver can take him to the shrine of St. Francis of Assisi. Stanley goes into a café and overhears two men discussing their encounter with a mummy. The locale shifts from Rome to Barbados to Paris to Los Angeles, where various minor characters discuss forgeries in art, literature and film. Stanley goes into a church to work on his organ piece. The sounds soar loudly to the heavens and the walls vibrate with the sounds. The church collapses and Stanley is killed. "He was the only person caught in the collapse and afterward most of his work was recovered too and it is still spoken of, when it is noted, with high regard though seldom played."

## Chapter 5 Analysis

The sadness of true creativity and artistry becomes poignant and absurd in the final scene in which Stanley finally plays his organ work, only to have the building collapse in on him. Although Stanley loses his life, he has the satisfaction of having played his work on a mighty organ in an Italian church. And there is always the possibility, however remote, that his work will live on and provide pleasure and inspiration to future generations.



# Characters

## Agnes Deigh

This satirically-named character whose moniker derives from the Latin "agnus dei," or lamb of God in the Bible, is a sun-tanned woman with a commanding voice who is married to a Hollywood screenwriter. In a sense, she is a distillation of the wealthy liberal New Yorker who is careful to observe all the politically and culturally correct behavior but who nonetheless is the subject herself of much envious gossip. She is described as "that full-blown flower whose fey petals curled and yellowed round its white spore-bearing carpel."

## Esmé

Esmé is a 29-year-old hippie prototype that is more a beatnik chick instead of a flower child. She presents herself as an intellectual and serious artist. Her lifestyle is open and user and "swinging" in the 1960s sense of the word. Esmé is also a heroin user and incipient alcoholic. She cares about art, her friends and her social status but little else. Her what-the-hell approach to life is both amusing and confounding inasmuch as the reader can see that her hipness is really a form of self-destruction.

## Otto

Otto is a struggling novelist who pops in and out of the narrative as he travels between New York and South America. Although he also leads a bohemian life, he is a fastidious person who freaks out when he thinks his novel MS has been lost. Although he strives for the cool attitude of other hipsters, he is very capable of jealous anger and a bit of self-righteousness. Otto comes across as basically a nice middle-class guy struggling to become a serious and noted author and to throw off the hangups and narrowness of his background.

## Reckall Brown

The obvious connotation of this satirical name is that of a brown-noser or someone so eager for approval that he makes a fool of himself. Reckall is a real phony, like Hollie Golightly in *Breakfast at Tiffany's*. He writes and publishes his own bad poetry and the poetry of others. Gifted at self-promotion, Reckall appears all over the bohemian map of Greenwich Village. His faux hipness serves as a sign to the reader that he is really a hustler instead of an artist, unless being a bullshit artist counts the same as being a painter or writer.



## The Rev. Gilbert Sullivan

Another satirical name, Gilbert Sullivan, is derived from the composers of happy schlock for the masses, Gilbert and Sullivan. Their music and operettas bear the musty smell of stale Victorianism and outdated British colonialism.

## The Rev. Richard Gwyon

Reverend Gwyon is a dour New Englander from a pedigreed family. After his wife dies on a cruise ship off the coast of Spain, he withdraws more into himself and is seldom available for anyone, including his son Wyatt who becomes an artist and art restoration expert in Europe.

## Fuller

Fuller is the Barbadian servant to Recktail Brown who also does art restorations and occasional forgeries. He is anxious to return to the Caribbean and tired of working for a task master such as Brown. He is a large man with a fondness for dogs, particularly the two dogs belonging to Brown, which he walks daily in Central Park.

## Mr. Pivner

Mr. Pivner is something like a forerunner of Woody Allen. He is an urban schlemiel who is constantly beset by the world and its insanity. He lives alone, rides the subway alone, and generally avoids other people. However, the world is constantly finding him in his burrow by means of newspaper headlines, radio news, and finally two Secret Service agents who arrest him for no other reason than a suspicion that he may be gay.

## Chaby

Chaby is the dark Hispanic drug addict who is always at Esmé's apartment whenever Otto calls. He speaks little, glowers much and generally serves to get Otto hot under the collar and frustrated. As a minor character, Chaby adds nothing to the narrative drive but seems to exist only to show how insidious addiction is, and how difficult it is for Esmé to get clean because of her addict friends and connections who won't leave her alone.

## Mr. Yak

Mr. Yak is a strange and dark figure who appears in San Zwingli interested in learning mummification. With drinking buddy Stanley, Mr. Yak exhumes the corpse of a woman, takes it back to his apartment and cuts the chest open to remove the internal organs before wrapping it in preservative oils.



# Objects/Places

## Greenwich Village

The colorful, historic Greenwich Village area of New York City, which is home to artists, intellectuals, and beatniks, is the focus of much of the action. In this bohemian cauldron, real artists rub shoulders with pretend artists and fakes of all kinds. Its atmosphere is stimulating with its constant focus on the arts and creativity. Greenwich Village is not just a place but also a state of mind conducive to personal freedom and supportive of creativity.

## Boston

Description

## Ecuador

Otto goes to live and work on a banana plantation in Ecuador and finishes his novel. However his MS is nearly lost when the maids who clean his apartment put it on top of a cabinet, out of his sight. Ecuador becomes Otto's writer-in-residence retreat where he can focus on his work without the constant distractions of living in New York City.

## Cadaver leg

In an early morning drunken caper, Otto and Ed Feasley raid a hospital morgue and make off with the severed leg of a corpse. They carry it around with them on high-speed drunken maneuvers and finally abandon it on a subway.

## Hyperdermic needle

Hyperdermic needles make their appearance in the lives of both Esmé, who uses it to shoot heroin and the pathetic Mr. Pivner, who uses one to inject insulin to control his diabetes.

## San Zwingli

San Zwingli is a small town on the Spanish coast where the Reverend Gwyon buries his wife, Camilla, when she dies on a cruise ship. For this decision, he is berated constantly by his mother. This area is also where Mr. Yak enlists the help of Stephan to exhume a recently-buried cadaver so that he can practice mummification.

## San Triebeza

San Tribeiza is the Central American port city where Otto's plane is forced to make a beach landing. When he arrives, the town is in the midst of a revolution, and he is summarily thrown on the sidewalk by a policeman, suffering a concussion.



# Themes

## Fake vs Real

It is no accident that the author chooses as his major theme the superficial and intellectually bankrupt in contrast with the real and genuine. Those artists who can flawlessly mimic others with true originality are revealed as greedy opportunists. Recktall Brown, art dealer/forgery and social climber, maintains that a good fake painting is a work of art unto itself and is worth whatever the public is willing to pay for it, whether it is counterfeit or not. Fake priests and religions find themselves, like the emperor of legend, naked in their venality. In their compulsive search for an identity, many characters develop a false persona they believe will please others, overlooking the fact they are themselves unique and that personal, spiritual growth is achievable through art, religion, literature, music and unselfish service to others. They share a common flaw in looking outside themselves for validation, thus stifling the very creativity they claim to worship. When these efforts fail, as they must, these seekers after truth and beauty realize they have become unreal themselves and try to escape their pain with drugs, alcohol, sex, shifting residences and immersion in academic "research" that serve to numb their deepening feelings of despair and self-loathing. They live within their own personal versions of hell. In the midst of this existential pain, the characters caught up in this web of illusion look to each other for salvation that never comes.

## Self-delusion

The old adage that one must first deceive one's self in order to deceive others, is demonstrated throughout. Every phony, con man, forger, counterfeiter, liar, and delusional person in the novel is awash in self-deception. A famous counterfeiter, for example, thinks of himself as a fine artist with skills superior to those of conventional designers of paper currency. An artist named Esmé lacks the self-confidence to mount an art exhibit for fear of rejection, instead finding escape with heroin and with other heroin addicts. Agnes Deigh, a literary agent, has grandiose views of herself and seeks through social climbing to nurture her desperate need to think highly of herself. At cocktail parties in New York, many of these artists and posers come together and feed off of each others' self-delusions until the whole context of reality becomes distorted. Seeking approval and confirmation of their identities, these ingrown personalities actually distance themselves further and further from reality, becoming unreal themselves.

## Creativity

Through the characters, the novel raises then question whether creativity in the pursuit of fakery is any less important than creativity for the purpose of making unique works of art. For example Herschel concocts phony interviews with celebrities and sells them to





fan magazines; he justifies this by thinking that his work, whether genuine or false, brings pleasure to readers and money for himself. Valentine collects art and sells forgeries but rationalizes it by convincing himself that purchasers derive satisfaction from believing they have acquired a timeless masterpiece, whether it's genuine or fake. In both cases, creativity is employed in a way that does violence to the basic standards of honesty and integrity. A counterfeiter takes pride in the artistry with which he creates his bogus bills. Otto becomes offended when the literary agent Agnes Deigh and others detect something eerily familiar in his novel that reminds them of other books. By creating a warped set of values about their misdirected creativity, these people try to dismiss their guilt feelings. Against the backdrop of such tomfoolery in the art world, a true work of creativity stands out even more for its individuality and truthfulness.

# Style

## Point of View

The point of view throughout is that of the omniscient narrator or one who hovers in the sky over New York City, Matheydrid, Ecuador, Spain, and other locales. Only occasionally does the author take the reader into interior monologue where the unedited and uncensored thoughts of characters give pulsing life to the narrative line. The great majority of the story is told without censorship as the complex choreography of the narrative unfolds. The inner and undisputed reality of characters' streams of consciousness could have provided a more solid bedrock upon which the surface tapestry of events could be hung, giving the reader a firmer grip on the story line as well as a more vivid juxtaposition of the characters' inner worlds as they conflict with the fake or unreal persona they have developed to survive. The point of view is also that of an insider within a circle of bohemians and con artists; a small close-knit society of those who see themselves as outside the mainstream of society. The narrator relates his story from the point of view of a savvy insider to this group.

## Setting

There are multiple physical settings for this novel such as Greenwich Village, Paris, Madrid, Italy, and more but the actual setting is within the minds and psyches of the major characters, each as they struggle to resolve their existential dilemma of identity and purpose. In this regard, physical settings are mere superficialities that serve as a backdrop to these inner struggles that are much the same in every character regardless of locale. The physical settings, which change as the story develops, are less important than the interior settings of the characters for whom location is merely incidental. The broader setting is the bohemian world that knows no geographic boundaries; the world is more raw material to be turned into art than an end in itself for most of the characters.

## Language and Meaning

The language is contemporary American English interspersed with words and sentences in German, French, Latin, Italian, Greek, and Russian. Even readers unfamiliar with these languages may be able to follow the narrative because of the context into which these other languages are inserted. Another striking feature of the language is the appearance of hipster argot that, in the early 1950s, was probably confined to Greenwich Village but that by the mid-60s had spread widely to the so-called counterculture. Some examples are "old man" for male partner, "flipped," "campiest," and "old lady."

Stylistically, there are several idiosyncrasies worth noting. Throughout, the author uses a dash at the start of quoted material such as conversational speech instead of the more conventional quotation marks beginning and end. This device is used in much of



Sinclair Lewis' fiction and occasionally in Faulkner's. Another oddity is the random appearance of words or phrases that have been stricken through, as though one were reading a manuscript draft rather than the finished novel. Some readers may find both of these quirks irritating as they present obstacles to smooth reading. There is no real explanation for these eccentricities and they seem to blunt, rather than sharpen, the impact of the narrative drive.

## Structure

Structurally the novel is divided into three "parts," each essentially a complete novella with its own setting and cast of characters. Thus there is little narrative connection between the parts, other than the overarching theme of the fake versus the real and the absurdity of life in the Cold War period. Locales shift from Madrid to Greenwich Village to Central America and Spain in a circular fashion. Although the major theme does hold these parts together, the reader may sense that the entire novel would be more powerful had the author interwoven the disparate sections into a less jarring series of transitions.

The novel lacks a focused plot line that serves to show how characters change as they confront and overcome challenges. Instead, the reader follows a group of characters as they sometimes interact and always struggle with their own inner identities. Thus the novel is more episodic in structure which enables the author to fold individual narrative lines back in upon themselves. This device seems more true to life as it happens instead of life as it is often manipulated in fiction. What may be lost in "action" is more than compensated for by the kind of gritty individualism the author portrays. Gaddis is an intellectual writer who writes for intellectuals. He has command not only of an impressive range of languages but also academic and ecclesiastical scholarship that lend depth and resonance to the narrative.

In terms of structure, Gaddis falls somewhere between the jagged interior monologues of James Joyce's *Ulysses* and the neatly-wrought prose of Henry James' *Portrait of a Lady*. At times, the tidal waves of multiple characters, locales, motivations and scenarios become confusing and the reader is forced to wonder if the interests of both author and reader would have been better served with a simpler, leaner structure. As an artistic principle, the concept of less is more definitely applies to this work.



## Quotes

"I'd been worn out in this piece of work, and when I finished I was free, free all of a sudden out in the world. In the street everything was unfamiliar, everything and everyone I saw was unreal. And then I saw this thing. When I saw it all of a sudden everything was freed into one recognition, really freed into reality that we never see, you never see it. You don't see it in paintings because most of the time you can't see beyond a painting" (Part 1, Chapter 3, pg. 91-92.)

"The alchemist, for Otto, was likely an unsophisticated man of a certain age assisting in a smelly hallucination over an open fire, tampering with the provenience of absolutes, as Bernard of Treves and an unnamed Franciscan are pictured seeking the universal dissolvent in the 15th Century with a mixture of mercury, salt, molten lead and human excrement, Otto was young enough to find answers before he had even managed to form the questions; nevertheless, if anyone had stopped him just then as he hurried up to Madison Avenue and asked what he was thinking about, Otto (to who thought was a series of free-swimming images which dove and surfaced occasionally near to one another) would have said: alchemy! without hesitation" (Chapter 3, pg. 131.)

"The people, the people, the people, they're bringing us to the point Rome reached when a court could award a painting to the man who owned the board, not the artist who had painted on it. Yes, when the Roman Republic collapsed, art collecting collapsed, art forging disappeared. And then what. Instead of art they had religion, and all the talent went into holy relics. Half the people collected them, the other half manufactured them" (Chapter 7, pg. 245.)

"Most original people are forced to devote all their time to plagiarizing. Their only difficulty is that if they have a spark of wit or wisdom themselves, they're given no credit. The curse of cleverness" (Chapter 7, pg. 252.)

"It was through this imposed accumulation of chaos that she struggled to move now: beyond it lay simplicity, unmeasurable, residence of perfection where nothing was created, ready-formed, where originality did not exist because it was origin; where once she was there work and thought in casual and stumbling sequence did not exist, but only transcription: where the poem she knew but could not write existed, ready-formed, awaiting recovery in that moment when the writing down of it was impossible: because she was the poem" (Part 2, chapter 1, pg. 300.)

"Like a story I heard once, a friend of mine told me, somebody I used to know, a story about a forged painting. It was a forged Titian that somebody had painted over another old painting, when they scraped the forged Titian away they found some worthless old painting underneath it, the forger had used it because it was an old canvas. But then there was something under that worthless painting, and they scraped it off and underneath that they found a Titian, a real Titian that had been there all the time. It was as though when the forger was working and he didn't know the original was underneath,



I mean he didn't know it, but it knew. I mean, something knew. I mean, do you see what I mean?" (Part 2, Chapter 4, pg. 451.)

"Ask them to play, 'Yes, We Have No Bananas,' Max said, smiling. 'That's from 'The Messiah,' and it's more their line. 'Yes, We Have No Bananas' was lifted right out of Handel's 'Messiah.' Come on, Max said, taking his arm and looking round for Otto. What's the matter with both of you today?" (Part 2, chapter 4, pg. 461.)

"She flipped, man. Chaby found her with the gas on. Then the haggard boy returned to Anselm. Did you hear about Charles? His old lady came from Grand Rapids to take him back there, she's a Christian Science. She came on all sweetness and light, you know, man. She thought she could turn him on with Mary Baker Eddy, but she won't give him a penny unless he comes home with her. I don't blame him for flipping" (Part 2, Chapter 4, pg. 478.)

"He even said once, that the saints were counterfeits of Christ, and that Christ was a counterfeit of God" (Part 2, Chapter 4, pg. 483.)

"They've got a [counterfeit] work of mine they picked up 30 years ago and they can compare it. They're not dumb, with a microscope in their hand the Secret Service, they can find the smallest resemblance, even after 30 years they can see my own hand in there, a little of myself, it's always there, a little always sticks no matter what I do" (Part 2, Chapter 5, pg. 491.)

"Everything is just like it was, isn't it. Only worse.. You've just got everything tangled up worse and worse, haven't you. And your guilt complexes and everything else, it's just gotten worse, hasn't it, all of it. And the way you pulled your hands away from me just now, it was just like when we were first married and I hardly knew you, and the longer we were married the less you...won't you talk to me? even now, won't you talk to me?" (Part 2, Chapter 7, pg. 589.)

"And now they've built this state hospital three miles away, it's full of feebs, feeble-minded people, and some niggers are building this crazy religious camp right across the river. I mean I've got nothing against niggers but Christ, you know?' Ed Feasley finished his drink" (Part 2, Chapter 7, pg. 615.)

"I wish I was an old man!' he burst out at her, and then lowered his eyes again, his pale hand inside his coat holding the thick packet there. 'Because damn it, this being young, it's like he said it was, it's a tomb, this youth, youth, youth, this thing in America, this accent on youth, on everything belongs to the young and we, look at us in this tomb, like he told me it could be, like he said it was.' And Otto raised his eyes to see nothing moving in her face." (Part 2, chapter 7, p. 621)

"I was once told that the reason for your rather oriental visage was that a bank fell on you in a Japanese earthquake some years ago? An American bank, of course. And there were none but the local surgeons to operate on your face, who knew only the faces to which their own mirrors had accustomed them" (Part 2, Chapter 8, pg. 650.)



"What's the tape over your eye, Morgie? Did she bite you?' 'This party I was at last night. A bunch of scared intellectuals, you know? A bunch of goddam Unamericans'" (Part 3, Chapter 2, pg. 735.)

"Why, proving one's existence, you'd be surprised what a man will do to prove his own existence. Why, there's no ruse at all that people will disdain to prove their own existences" (Part 3, Chapter 3, pg. 800.)

"Come into Toledo [Spain] at night, it's monstrous, with only the stars, the heaps of broken buildings, all weight and shadow, and you'll never see it that way again, after you've waked the next morning and walked through the town all laid out under foot in the daylight, and where were you wandering the night before?" (Part 3, Chapter 5, pg. 895.)

"Well then, perhaps this afternoon we shall drive together to see Cardinal Spermelli, he was acquainted at Fenestrula" (Part 3, Chapter 5, pg. 907.)

"Max had left the Royale. How does he make it, does he work somewhere? He lives in a suburb called Banlieu, Hannah said, he paints pictures for a well-known painter who signs them and sells them as originals. But they are originals. Twelve Arab children sold peanuts from the tops of baskets and hashish from the bottom" (Part 3, Chapter 5. pg. 944.)



## Topics for Discussion

How does The Reverend Gwyon react to the death of his wife while they are cruising off the coast of Spain? How does his mother react?

What does Cremer the art critic do when Wyatt Gwyon refuses to pay him a bribe for good publicity?

What is the relationship between Esther, Wyatt Gwyon's wife, and Otto the aspiring novelist?

What is the primary motivation of Fuller, Recktail Brown's servant and art forger?

How are Esmé the artist and Chaby the drug addict connected? What does Otto think of this relationship?

What is the relationship between Otto, the writer, and Agnes Deigh?

Why does Otto keep returning to Central America from New York City?

Does Mr. Pivner live a secret life and if so, what is it? Why does he use hypodermic needles?

What causes Otto's flight to make an emergency landing on the beach at Tibieza?

Why is Stanley arrested and how does his arrest tie in with the central theme of the novel?