

# **A Summons to Memphis Study Guide**

## **A Summons to Memphis by Peter Taylor**

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# Plot Summary

*A Summons to Memphis* is a story about Phillip Carver, an adult who narrates events in his childhood that led to his present day situation. The biggest event was when he moved with his parents and siblings to Memphis at the age of thirteen. The narrator believes that this sole action was the reason for the family's subsequent lifestyle.

Phillip is in his late forties and has since moved to Manhattan. His sisters, Betsy and Josephine have remained single and live near their father. His mother had died two years ago. Phillips's friend Alex, who also lives in Memphis, is quite worried about the widowed father and how the sisters would react if he decided to date and marry again.

Phillip recalls two old widowers from his childhood and the lengths their children went to keep them from remarrying. Institutionalization and banishment were not too extreme for children who did not want to share their future inheritances with a stepmother. Alex believes this is the route the sisters' will take with their dad.

The father does begin to date and the sisters seem to be okay with it. They relish being able to tell stories about his expeditions. They follow him around to the clubs and report his actions back to Phillip. Phillip thinks this is curious, but does not think too much on the matter. His own, long time girlfriend has moved out of the apartment and he is muddling over the loss.

One night, Father's actions seem to have gone too far. Phillip gets a call first from Betsy, then Josephine, summoning him back to Memphis to help handle the situation with Father. He has found a woman he intends to marry.

To explain how the present came to be, Phillip goes back and details events of his life since the move from Nashville. Philip Carver's father pulled up the stakes from Nashville after a long-standing friend and business partner deceived him. The family moved to Memphis and started over in 1931. In hindsight, Phillip recognizes Father seems to be the only one who made the transition without any residual scars over the years.

Betsy and Josephine were nineteen and twenty at the time of the move. They were both popular and had suitors looking for marriage. Each sister had a suitor at one time and was close enough for a proposal. However, Father steps in and the young men leave.

Betsy had Wyant Brawley as her beau. They were treated as an engaged couple. However, they did not make an announcement, perhaps, since Josephine was debuting that year. Wyant was traveling with the family as they moved and Father got antsy when they stayed behind at a restaurant a few minutes longer than the rest of the family. Eventually, he did not come around anymore and Betsy was alone.

Josephine had Clarkson Manning, who was interested in her. After dinner one night, Clarkson mentioned he was a distant relation to Lewis Shackelford. He did not see



Josephine again. A couple years later, the sisters took on independence and opened a real estate business. Each bought a house in Memphis.

Phillip also had a brother named Georgie. Georgie told everyone he was drafted into World War II, when actually he enlisted himself. With the help of his sisters, he left for the war and ultimately, the end of his life.

Phillip recalls his mother and how she withdrew from life after the move to Memphis.

His sisters send him letters detailing Father's escapades. They are humorous for the most part. The last ones are more troublesome and come in shortly before the phone calls summoning him to Memphis.

Phillip returns to Memphis on the day the wedding is supposed to take place. His dad is happy and eager to see him. They head directly to the church, but find the pastor waiting outside with a note. The bride has left and will not be returning for a wedding.

Father is stunned and Phillip and Alex are secretly shocked. They assume the sisters had something to do with it. They return back to his house to find a moving van outside. Both of the sisters have given up their independent lifestyles and are moving back to live and keep a closer eye on Father.

Father's health starts to fail as the sisters' plan a vacation to a mountain resort. They ask Phillip to come. While they are eating one day, they run face to face with the man who forced their move from Nashville and subsequently the change of their futures. Lewis Shackelford approaches Father. The two act as if they are old friends and nothing has happened. The children are shocked and a little outraged.

The same dinner also presents Phillip with another situation. A woman he loved and had intended to be with, Clara Price is seated with her family at a table nearby. One of the sisters recognizes her and comments on the fact. After a moment, Phillip realizes he never introduced her to the family.

Father and Lewis seem to get back together as friends. Lewis invites Father for a visit, but the sisters, and even Phillip this time, block the visit. Betsy says Lewis has died and there will be no trip. Father seems to think on it a little and while talking with Phillip, he wonders how he always knows when to come back. Phillip doesn't really say. He just says that he is his ally. They start a weekly phone conversation after that and it serves both of them well.

Father's health fails and ultimately, he dies of a stroke the following spring. Phillip has reconciled with Holly during this time and her father is also sick. Both deal with the deaths of their fathers and come closer in doing so. Phillip gives Holly the clover pendant and wonders if she has seen it before in his drawer. She doesn't seem to mind and life goes on in his serene apartment, with Memphis out of his mind.



# Chapter 1

## Chapter 1 Summary

The narrator of the story, Philip Carver, explains how life is for a widower if he has middle aged children. He recalls two men from his teenage years, who went through similar situations that his father is now faced with. The middle aged children interfered with the men's happiness and prevented another marriage. Any marriage to a younger woman could mean less of an inheritance in money and land for the children.

Two years had passed since his mother had died and his father had not ventured out to date until now. His single sisters and remaining friend in Nashville, Alex Mercer, commented on it to him often.

His dad did venture out and over the next couple months, the tone of the sisters began to change. He received two long-distance phone calls from his sisters the same night, explaining the actions of their father. Father wants to marry. They wanted him to come to Memphis and help with the problem.

He contemplates the problem from his Manhattan apartment. His long-time girlfriend, Holly Kaplan, has just moved out. He doesn't want to interfere, but his sense of family wins and he ends up going to Memphis.

He explains the need to delve into past family events in order to fully explain the present situation. The biggest situation was his father and his business associate, Lewis Shackelford. Lewis had cheated and deceived his father and his father felt the need to uproot the family and move to Memphis in 1931.

## Chapter 1 Analysis

He is mulling over his situation with an estranged girlfriend. His sisters summon him to Memphis for assistance. His father had recently started dating after the passing of his mother two years ago.

Phillip is debating whether his friend, Alex was finally right about his spinster sisters and his widowed father. Would they make it impossible for their father to find happiness in another marriage? Did middle aged children always interfere in the life of a parent that has been widowed?

Since he is the narrator of the tale, he believes in order to fully understand the story and what is about to happen, one must understand the past events. The move to Memphis in 1931 happened at a critical juncture in all of their lives. Betsy and Josephine were looking to get married and Phillip had entered adolescence.



## Chapter 2

### Chapter 2 Summary

Phillip Carver describes his mother as being from the old school, but also being witty and risqué at times. She was born and bred in Nashville, but had influences of Richmond, where her mother grew up.

She admitted to Phillip that she feared the move to Memphis would be like "The Trail of Tears." Later, he speculated she was developing a whole new personality in Memphis. She had to find new friends, new parties, and new clubs to join. The children were older and she had more freedom to do so, but was torn from the past.

Betsy's beau, Wyant Brawley, is traveling with the caravan to Memphis. Betsy and Wyant stay behind at a restaurant to visit with some people their own age. Father gets back on the road and gets angrier as the miles pass and he does not see their car. When he does see their car, they stop at a gas station. Father is still agitated. He snaps at the servants and Phillip recalls it is one of the very few times he ever heard him talk like that.

Betsy and Wyant's agreement fell apart within six weeks. He had come to visit a couple of weekends and Father did not speak to him, nor Betsy, for a few days after he had left. One time, Wyant did ask Father what the offense was and Father was offended. Betsy was offended that Wyant had asked and things were never the same. Father convinced Betsy that Wyant was not trustworthy.

Josephine met a beau named Clarkson Manning. They got along well. At dinner one night, Clarkson happened to mention the name that was not supposed to be uttered near Father. He was a distant relative of Lewis Shackelford. Father left the table with a sick stomach. Josephine and Clarkson were no longer together after a few days.

A few years later, Phillip admits to his mother that he thinks their lives were ruined by the move and she laughs. He ended up laughing with her, but wondered if it was the same person who was tender and caring as he grew up. Lately, when he mentioned serious topics, she laughed and it made him uncomfortable.

### Chapter 2 Analysis

He explains that both sisters, at one time, had a suitor who would have worked for marriage. Father had, in both cases, put an end to each one for reasons he didn't like, not ones the girls did not like.

Father told Wyant he was not trustworthy without giving a specific reason. Wyant was angry and demanded a reason why they should not marry. Phillip comments that no matter the reason, the family did not like the outburst towards Father.



Josephine came out of her depression and found a suitor. He was well and fine until dinner one night. He mentions Lewis Shackleford as being a distant relative. He only lasted days after that episode.

Phillip remarked to his mother that the move had ruined their lives. He thought it to be a serious discussion and she laughed at him. He wondered if the caring and tender mother was only for children and as they grew up, she did not exist any longer.





# Chapter 3

## Chapter 3 Summary

Alex Mercer rode in the limo with Phillip on the way from the cemetery and remarked about what may happen with Father. Phillip told him not to worry. Father did start dating and the sisters handled it well. Alex seemed relieved. He wondered if the world had changed and become more open since the old widowers he remembered as a child.

Alex wrote every week to Phillip giving him updates on his family. He reported the sisters liked to retell the stories of their father's escapades. Phillip commented that his sisters had a sometimes cruel sense of humor and over exaggerated some of Father's actions. Alex was beginning to feel uncomfortable with their actions.

Phillip says he dreaded seeing them for the first time every time they picked him up at the airport. He recalls them being labeled as "those two awful Nashville girls" and that they were the "wildest things that ever got inside the Memphis Junior League." They were active and independent with their business making them equal to men in many regards.

Phillip knew they would never marry, but they always brought suitors around and asked his opinion. It would become some sort of game and they played it with Father as well.

Phillip remembers feeling guilt when he lived in New York in the beginning. Betsy and Josephine helped him get away and he was obliged to them for doing so. He felt they choose to remain home and had a lot of pressure put upon them taking care of the family, since he and Georgie had left.

The sisters did not dress age appropriately according to Phillip and it was often a source of embarrassment to him. They wore clothes that were too revealing or too small. When he or Father would be shocked, they just laughed.

Their business attire was completely professional, however, and he was relieved. He was also relieved to return to Holly Kaplan and his New York life.

## Chapter 3 Analysis

Phillip's mother has died. In the limo on the way home, Alex mentions what may happen in the future between the sisters and Father. Phillip shrugs it off, not really worried that they will do so. Alex isn't as pacified and still worries about Father.

Phillip recalls each time when he does go home and the games the sisters play. Their outlandish and inappropriate dress embarrasses him. They play nonsense games asking about suitors and if they would be good for marriage. In their immature banter, Phillip knows they will never marry.



# Chapter 4

## Chapter 4 Summary

Phillip recalls a time when he arrived back at his Manhattan apartment. He came in the door, dropped his luggage, and gave Holly a hug. She made a comment that it must have been worse than usual. Phillip poured out tales from the trip while she smoked and listened. She said he was obsessed with his family.

Phillip admits this is a fight they often had, complaining about their families. When he got the call the night to go to Memphis, even though Holly had moved out, he thought of calling her about it.

He didn't, but thought all night about the letters Alex had written and what to do. Phillip remembers when he met Alex, shortly after the move to Memphis. Alex thought he was an "exotic creature" from his dress and his look. The boys in Memphis wore a different sort of clothing from the school he attended in Nashville. Alex also thought he was much younger than he really was.

Phillip had already had young adult experiences with girls, but dressed and talked immaturely, according to Alex. He helped him to change his ways and dress and act older.

Phillip tells about the first time Alex met his Father and was enthralled with him ever since. Phillip feels his father was a barrier to independence, but he and Alex were "kindred spirits." Alex and Father continued with the relationship and became close confidants. Alex would come over to listen to Father's stories. Phillip would feign interest and Georgie would go away.

Phillip recalls Georgie pulling away from the family a lot. Georgie adapted to Memphis right away and left the Nashville dialect from his voice.

Phillip goes back to the intimate relationship between Alex and Father, but it never affected their friendship. Alex greatly worried about the sisters and how they would react to Father's new female friends. He also spoke of the love the sisters had for Father. Phillip secretly wondered if they also had strong emotions of the opposite feeling.

## Chapter 4 Analysis

The chapter sets up tension between Holly and Phillip regarding their families. It is a sore subject with both of them, but we don't really know why. Their families aren't talked about very much, but when they are, it usually isn't nice.

In the chapter, we also see how Alex and Phillip became friends. Alex also became a close confidant with Father throughout the years. They respected each other greatly, but it never got in the way of the friendship between Phillip and Alex.



# Chapter 5

## Chapter 5 Summary

Phillip acknowledges that Alex is the only person he can truly confide in. Twice, he calls him from Chattanooga over the loss of Clara Price, the one true love of his life. He later finds out that his father, against Alex's advice, went to Clara's dad and interfered. Clara allowed herself to be sent to South America, thus ending his love affair.

Phillip later recognized his father had a hand in preventing his marriage and was bitter about it. He was in the service during the war and was then transferred to Georgia. He was happy to get away from Memphis. He watched the other soldiers having fun, but took no part in after-hour activities.

Phillip tells of how he met Clara Price. He was on a hill on his way to the Old Civil War battlegrounds. They spent the whole afternoon together and the next few days following. He got along well with her family. They spent as much time as possible together the next several months. He bought her presents and believed she was the only one he had ever done so for.

Phillip went to visit Memphis and spent time with his mother, who was having an episode. She had completely withdrawn from life into her bedroom. Phillip was in there with her and spied a clover in her jewelry box. Mother told him to take it and give it to his friend. He took it to a jeweler and had it fixed. He mentioned to Clara he would have a gift ready the next time he saw her, but it never was exchanged. He did not know his father had already been there and talked to her father. He kept the clover in his wallet and never told anyone about it.

Phillip was shipped to France, where Alex was stationed. He left his wallet and the clover in Alex's care in case something should happen to him during his enlisted period. When he returned from the war, Alex gave it back to him unopened.

Two years later, in November, Phillip woke up in his Father's house and left. He had decided to go to New York and made it there with his sister's help. He ate breakfast with Betsy that morning and was ashamed at how he was leaving "Peter Pan" fashion. He knew his father would try and talk him out of it, like he did all his children when they strayed from his path. Josephine drove him to the airport and said she would send supplies that he needed.

## Chapter 5 Analysis

This chapter is where we learn how good of a friend Alex is. Phillip confides in him about his father and sisters. We learn about Clara Price, the person he says is the only one true love of his life. Phillip's pain reinforces the notion that his father took matters in



his own hands, several times, without consent of his children, and altered their future plans and mates.

We see that Mother has had a hard time of things and has retreated into her bedroom. Phillip visits her and she gives him a clover from her jewelry box. She admits it was given to her by someone other than his father, someone else that she loved.

Phillip has had enough and asks his sisters to help him leave. He goes to Manhattan to live and only returns to Memphis for visits from then on. He leaves in the night without telling Father, for fear he will try and talk him out of it.



# Chapter 6

## Chapter 6 Summary

George Carver started stepping out with young women. Betsy and Josephine seemed eager for audiences to hear their stories which were now "hilariously funny." They told stories, which were corroborated by Alex's oldest son, Howard, but seemed to hold no ill will.

Phillip's father was going to "dives" as they were called. Betsy always wrote about it, and what Father wore. Phillip thought that was funny considering her mode of dress was usually inappropriate. Father arrived at the Blue Moon with a young lady and two other couples. Through the night, Father was left alone while the other couples danced or left without saying goodbye.

In the recalling of the event, Phillip realizes that Betsy and Howard went together. His sisters used escorts to their night rendezvous, not the ones him and Father get to meet.

Phillip kept thinking about the letters his sister's had sent. It described an evening at the Yellow Parrot where Father arrived with a cane. He thought the only reason Father was going to these places and making a fool of himself was because his sisters had been name dropping and it was the only places he knew where to go.

Another incidence happened at the Red Lantern with both Josephine and Betsy were present. Father could not see very well and ended up sitting close to them, but never recognized the sisters. Father got up and headed to the restroom. He stood outside the doors trying to read, but ended up going in the wrong one. He came out quickly, with a red mark on his cheek. He stumbled on the dance floor until another man from the group assisted him.

## Chapter 6 Analysis

Father has started stepping out and the sisters are keeping a close eye on him. Phillip wonders if and when the humorous stories will turn malicious, or if the sisters will do what maiden sisters have done in the past to widowed fathers.

While reading between the lines of several letters he receives, Phillip knows Howard, the son of Alex, is indeed the escort of one sister. The places that Father is frequenting are none other than the only ones the sisters mention to him. Is it so they can keep a closer eye on him, knowing where he will be or a mockery that normally he never would have visited those establishments?

Father is being humiliated, regardless, and he decides to go to Memphis to see what he can do.



# Chapter 7

## Chapter 7 Summary

Phillip gets the call about his Father and Clara Stockwell's intentions. He is mulling over his loneliness without Holly, even though she has only been gone for a week. Normally, he would have let his sisters go and not helped in their plans with Father. However, he was also dealing with loneliness and felt a relation to his father in it. He decided to go to Memphis and see what he could do.

During the night and on his plane trip to Memphis, Phillip thinks about the differences between the two lifestyles. His father could not have known the trauma he caused him, moving at thirteen to a new city. Phillip felt his transition into adolescence was interrupted. He also came to the conclusion that he had to convince his sisters to forget, and that vengeance was not for them to determine. He knew it was too late to forgive, but they could forget.

Phillip arrived at the airport and was surprised to see Father out on the tarmac waving to him. Father had never picked him up before. Phillip was both embarrassed and happy to see his father eagerly awaiting his arrival. He would soon learn that the wedding was supposed to be at noon and he was serving as Best Man.

While Phillip watched his father, he noticed his mode of dress and how it had always been so important to him. He stayed with his clothes chests every time they moved and watched them being loaded and unloaded.

Phillip finally met his father and saw Alex waiting near gate number eight. Father seemed to be in a hurry and looked around as if he was waiting for something to jump out of the bushes. Phillip recognized Father was waiting for his sister's to jump out and interrupt his progress to the church.

In the back of Alex's car, Father slips his arm through Phillip's. Father had commented that it was such a great coincidence that Phillip showed up on this day and be with him. He was secretly wondering if his sisters really would interfere with the nuptials planned for the day. He also kept remembering his plan of forgetting. He had a hard time of it, but when seated by his father, they came back to him. He suddenly understood his sisters and their actions - their inability to forget kept them immature and frozen in their roles as "injured adolescents."

The men arrive at the church and find the pastor waiting outside with a note. Father recognized at once Clara was not coming and read the note she had left for him. Alex sat with his head on the steering wheel and Phillip watched his Father's voice go cold. He never once voiced his suspicion that Betsy or Josephine had a hand in the matter. His father pulled his arm out of his and sat ramrod straight in the car for the rest of the ride.



## Chapter 7 Analysis

Phillip decides to go to Memphis and see what he can do. He realizes he has a bond of loneliness with his father since he too is living alone now. In that loneliness, he realizes it is best to forget and let Father not be lonely the rest of his life. He only needs to convince his sisters to forget and let father be.

All during the airplane ride, he is going over his past hurts and his sisters at the hands of Father. When his airplane arrives, his father is there and showing warmth towards him, which he has not done in years. Phillip is first glad, but then taken aback. He knows now that forgetting may be harder than he thought. And how dare his father show warmth all of a sudden, after being cold and closed off for so many years.

Father is in a hurry to get to the church. Alex, Phillip, and Father arrive to find that Clara has stood him up. Father is dejected, but only says, "Let's get home and see what else the girls have in store for me." It is the only phrase he utters where he hints that he knows what they did - sent Clara away.





# Chapter 8

## Chapter 8 Summary

It was a mile drive from the church to Father's steps of his house. During the ride back, he appeared to be in conversation with himself. Phillip half expected his father to travel to California or prevail with his strong will in some other way. He did not think his sisters had the means of institutionalization or incarceration like the old men he remembered of his childhood.

They got closer to Father's house and recognized an object outside to be a moving van. They realized someone was moving in and it was both sisters. Phillip realized how determined his sisters were to keeping Father alone. Alex would not even face the sisters and enter the house.

The sisters each greeted him cordially. He was informed the daybed had been made up for him in the study. Phillip, however, could not bear to stay the night in the house. He made reservations to fly home that same evening.

## Chapter 8 Analysis

This is a very short chapter, emphasizing the determination the sisters have in their vengeance against Father. Upon their return from the church, there is a moving van outside Father's house and Betsy and Josephine are both moving in with him. Phillip is shocked at their tactics and Alex is made ill by it. Phillip cannot stand to spend the night and returns to Manhattan the same day.



# Chapter 9

## Chapter 9 Summary

Phillip returns to Manhattan and believes the vendetta against his father is over by the sisters. He is wrong and he soon finds out. At the same time, Holly has returned and is plagued by her aging father and his unhappiness in Cleveland. Both of them wonder how they can protect the parents, yet cannot bear to be with them at the same time.

Phillip recalls that while leaving the day of the disastrous trip to Memphis, Josephine whispered to him that she and Betsy were retiring. Phillip was shaken to the core, not realizing they would devote all of their time to monitoring and limiting his whereabouts.

In trying to understand his father, Phillip recalls how he was born into a luxury. He was well cared for and spoiled by servants and family alike. He had every want and desire filled. With Holly's influence in dealing with her father, he came to understand his as not being so selfish. His father had a craving for "otherness" which he was not to attain.

## Chapter 9 Analysis

Phillip tries to understand his father and his actions. Holly has moved back in with him and is trying to do the same with her ailing father. Together, they reach some conclusions about family, but don't want to go and visit them.

Phillip realizes his sisters were very much like the children he remembered as a youth, confining their parents from freedom and happiness. They gave up their jobs, their independence, and their homes in order to live with father.



# Chapter 10

## Chapter 10 Summary

George Carver and Lewis Shackleford were great friends. Phillip spent a lot of time watching the pair and their individuality. Mrs. Shackleford and Mother were friends too, and often did things as families together, even though the Shackleford's did not have children.

Phillip often sat in on business meetings where his father and Mr. Shackleford presided. They never raised their voices, only listened to what went on around them. They were deep in thought, usually.

Six years, after the move to Nashville, was when the "Deception" of father by Mr. Shackleford occurred. Father was temporarily working in St. Louis at another company. Several times, Mr. Shackleford was to come and explain why money had been transferred and mortgaged without his knowledge. Three separate instances, Mr. Shackleford was not there when Father went to pick him up. Father was angry. It went to court, but since Father was not in Nashville to see the actions, he was never called upon as a witness.

In coming to terms with the ill-fated move, Phillip thought it admirable that Father had the courage to move and start over. However, he did not take into consideration his wife or his four children's state of being.

## Chapter 10 Analysis

In trying to put all the pieces of his father together, he recalls the relationship between Father and Mr. Shackleford. It started out as friends that greatly admired one another. They worked well as business partners and Phillip was able to observe them in action.

The deception of Father by Mr. Shackleford is explained. It hints that there was a great affection by both men and because of such, Mr. Shackleford sent Father away so he would not be a guilty party to it. In sending him away, it looks like betrayal, but maybe it was actually a protection mechanism.



# Chapter 11

## Chapter 11 Summary

Phillip receives a letter from Josephine, the first one in three months. She says Father is frail and needs to get away from Memphis. They have booked two weeks at Owl Mountain Inn in July. They would like him to come also.

Owl Mountain was an hour away from Chattanooga and split Middle and East Tennessee. Phillip flew in on a Thursday to stay the weekend. The days seemed uneventful and Father did not appear as frail as was supposed.

Sunday, before Phillip was scheduled to leave, they had dinner. Walking in, he noticed Clara Price at a table with five teenagers, her children presumably. He was torn between introducing himself and introducing her to his sisters and Father. He dives in to eat his food, but stops cold with Betsy's words. She recognized Clara Price. Josephine turned around and commented that it must be.

Phillip had never introduced them in the past. He knew, by their crimson faces, they had interfered in his life. Before that situation is over, Josephine bends over and hisses she was nothing. Lewis Shackelford has spotted them and is ambling over to greet Father.

Father stood up and the two men embraced. Father announced, "Look who's here children." The two men walked off and chatted like no time had passed.

Josephine and Betsy misunderstood Phillip's agony and thought it was getting away from Clara Price he so desired. They each stood next to him and left the dining area. Later, before Phillip departed, Father, Betsy, Josephine and Phillip sat on the porch and talked. Not a word was mentioned about whom they saw while dining.

Six weeks later, Phillip was summoned to come to Memphis. Father had been having long conversations with Mr. Shackelford every week since reuniting. He had invited him to Nashville for an extended visit. Betsy did not want him to go and wanted Phillip to come and forbid the trip to Father. He could not imagine himself helping Father to get away, nor could he imagine restraining him there.

Alex was waiting for Phillip at the airport. They got to Father's house right at the departure time. Alex, without knowing, had pulled his car in so as Father's was blocked.

Inside the house Josephine said they were too old for such trips. Father appeared with a broad smile, until he asked why Phillip was there. He looked to Josephine and knew she had planned something. They sat and talked a few minutes until the phone rang. Betsy came into the room shortly and announced Mr. Shackelford had died and there would be no trip.



The next morning, breakfast seemed normal as ever, with no discussion of the day before. Phillip noticed his sister's health was fine and that even his Father, had his spirits back. He realized this was more of a game for them and they were used to bouncing back faster than he was.

Phillip and Father engage in dialogue about Alex and who summons him home when he is about to leave. Phillip does not tell him exactly who, but says he is his ally. It was time to leave and Phillip noticed Alex did not even come into the house. Alex wanted Phillip to move to Memphis and teach where he did, so he could be closer to his father and the antics the sisters played.

## Chapter 11 Analysis

Phillip agrees with his sisters one more time and makes the trip to the mountains for a family getaway in Owl Mountain Inn. It goes uneventful until Sunday dinner. Phillip recognizes Clara Price and her family, as do Betsy and Josephine. The sisters make the mistake of noticing her too, however, Phillip had never introduced them. At that point, he knew they had a part in interfering with his life. They became scarlet, as they knew they were given away as well.

Before that conversation can take place, Mr. Shackelford is headed in Father's direction. The men embrace like no time has passed, nor deception, and prove to Phillip that things can be forgotten. In watching the sister's stew, Phillip recognizes their want for vengeance was deep. Phillip is surprised by the sister's actions and goes home.

Several weeks go by and he finally gets another letter summoning him home. He is needed to forbid Father from taking an extended vacation. He really doesn't think he will, but goes anyway. Alex isn't sure what to make of the situation either. The situation is taken out of his hands when it is reported Lewis Shackelford has died. Phillip returns home to Holly, glad to be away.



# Chapter 12

## Chapter 12 Summary

When Phillip arrived home, Holly asked him if he helped Father escape. He told her no and that Mr. Shackleford had died the night before.

Phillip decided to give Holly the clover he had been carrying around for years. She commented she thought she had seen it before, but didn't mind.

A weekly phone conversation began between Phillip and his father. They talked about the past and all of the people in between. Phillip got tremendous satisfaction from the calls.

Father died of a stroke the next spring. Holly's father had also died and they got a small sum of inheritance between the two. They still lived the same, in the same small apartment with the same mismatched furniture.

## Chapter 12 Analysis

Phillip has started talking to his father as a way to be his ally. He can't physically help him past the sisters, but he can be there to provide conversation. In doing so, he gained a bit of satisfaction and understanding of the past.

His father died the next spring, as did Holly's. Both decided to let go of their pasts and forget about the cities they grew up in. They became content in their serene little apartment. Phillip gave Holly the clover he had had for years that was meant for Clara Price. In handing it over, Phillip acknowledged this was the way things should be.



# Characters

## George (Father) Carver

Father is the head of the Carver family. He was betrayed by his best friend and business partner, Lewis Shackelford in Nashville. He decided to move the whole family to Memphis and start over with his business life. In turn for moving the family and disrupting their lives, when he is in his eighties and a widower, his children get retribution. He starts to go out to clubs with "youngish" ladies and ends up humiliating himself. His daughters follow him and take great fun in repeating and embellishing his treks. They interfere with his chance at remarriage and possible happiness. Father seems to know Betsy and Josephine had a hand in running Clara, his potential wife off to California, but does not accuse or scold them for it. He also seems resigned to his fate when he sees them moving in to his house the same day. When he meets Lewis Shackelford forty years after the move, they greet each other as if no time has passed and no argument took place. Father is invited to spend some time with Mr. Shackelford, but he passes away before Father can get to Nashville. He begins phone conversations with Phillip and they share a bond for a short time before he dies the following spring.

## Phillip Carver

Phillip is the narrator of the story and only surviving son of George Carver. Phillip learns through actions of his sisters and himself, that the mental trauma of moving as teenagers affected the rest of their lives. He sneaks off to Manhattan in his late twenties to have a solitary life. Phillip is summoned to help with Father's situation one Sunday night. Ultimately, the sisters want him to help stand in the way of Father's marriage, but he does not know how he will act. He debates over heading to Memphis, but decides to when he realizes he has a connection to Father - loneliness. His longtime-girlfriend has moved out, so he can relate to his father for once in his life. He makes several trips to Memphis to deal with the family, but is ultimately happy to get back to his publishing world in Manhattan. On one such trip, he realizes he needs to convince his sisters to forget the actions of their father. Their inability to do so has kept them immature in some ways, as is Phillip. Phillip has to forget Father's interference with Clara Price in order to learn to love again. His current relationship, with long time-girlfriend Holly Kaplan, is stable but bland. In learning to forget about the past, Phillip can try to love her. He realizes things with Holly are meant to be. After his last trip to Memphis, he gives her the clover he had been hanging on to that was for Clara Price.

## Betsy Carver

Betsy is the eldest daughter of George Carver and sister to Phillip. She has remained single and runs a real estate business with her sister Josephine. Betsy is smart and sophisticated, but often times dresses and acts as a young girl. She seeks out



vengeance against her father for his interference in her engagement at twenty years old. She gets it by stopping his marriage to Clara Stockwell. She gets further revenge when she gives up her job at the real estate business and moves in with Father to watch his every move. The readers do not get Betsy's thoughts as the story is told completely from Phillip's point of view.

## Josephine Carver

Josephine is the youngest daughter of George Carver and sister to Phillip. Josephine also runs the real estate business in Memphis with Betsy and has her own house. Since most of the story is in flashback, we never get Josephine's perspective of the past of her father's actions in it. Josephine has not gotten over the loss of a beau in her younger years. She also dresses too young for her age and has not matured in many adult ways. She plays games with her dates and with Father and Phillip by asking if they would make a good husband. When Lewis Shackelford is seen at Owl Mountain Inn, she is horrified when Father gets up and embraces the man as if nothing has happened.

## Alex Mercer

Alex is Phillip's best friend in Memphis and confidant to George. He was very concerned when Mother died, for fear of what the single sisters would do if Father did find another woman to remarry. In old Memphis, he remembers as a boy the things other single, middle-aged children did to their parents. He does not want that for Father. Alex relays information to Phillip as much as his sisters do about their father's doings. After a short time, the sisters do not act how he typically expected them to and he was slightly relieved. He thought maybe modern times and women's independence had changed things in modern Memphis. However, when Phillip is ultimately summoned to Memphis, things have turned out exactly as Alex feared. He is a trusted source of information and is disgusted by the actions of his friend and the sisters towards the end of the story. Over the years, he had become a trusted confidant and is liked and respected by the man greatly.

## Holly Kaplan

Holly is the longtime-girlfriend of Phillip, who shares his Manhattan apartment with old furniture. Holly also has issues with her father and family, but does not discuss it too much with Phillip. Phillip and her usually fight about how much time they dwell on their family situations. After the trips to Memphis, she usually asks how it was and he tells her briefly, then it's over. In the end, she also feels sympathy for her father, but does not know how to protect him when she can't stand to be around him.





## Mother

She is the caring and tender mother of Phillip, Georgie, Betsy, and Josephine. At times, she seemed happy with the move to Memphis and her newfound freedom, but she mocked it at other times. Her health began to fail years later and she never regained her strength. She is dead at the beginning of the story, but is briefly mentioned in flashbacks by Phillip in other parts of the story.

## Lewis Shackelford

Lewis is the boss and very good friend of George Carver. His betrayal of Father led to the family having to uproot and relocate to Memphis. In an afterthought, it seems as if Lewis kept Father away from Nashville to avoid getting him involved in the scandal. Father did not think that way and was humiliated. Years later when they are old men, George and Lewis reconnect as if nothing has happened. He invites Father to stay with him in Nashville for an extended stay, but dies before Father even leaves Memphis. Lewis' early life shows him as a smart, vibrant man. In his old age, he seems like a frail, old man incapable of doing such damage to a family.



## Objects/Places

### Phillip's Manhattan Apartment

A small, dingy place where Phillip lives with his longtime-girlfriend, Holly Kaplan. The furniture does not match. They are relatively happy most of the time.

### Memphis

Memphis is the city that is like the Old South, but not quite. This is where the Carver family moves to start life anew after the betrayal of Lewis Shackelford. The city treats the Carver's well, but is not good enough, or will ever be as grand as Nashville.

### Nashville

The place where the Carver's were born and raised part of their lives. The Old South traditions and values were drilled in to them. The family was content to live there and belonged to many clubs and organizations of affluence.

### Carver House in Memphis early years

Several houses where the family lived, but never seemed to get its footings as a family unit. The family lived here together for a number of years, until the girls bought their own houses and Georgie left for the war.

### George Carver's house in Memphis later years

Where Father lived by himself after Mother had died and the children were gone. This house would soon become his confinement when Josephine and Betsy moved back after his marriage attempt.

### Carver house in Nashville

A place where the family was happy and content to live in the country. They had horses and barns. They lived a nice life next to the Shackelford's.

### The Shackelford home in Nashville

A large, affluent house that was right next door to the Carver's.



## **Nashville Society**

The Carver sisters had their debuts there and had eligible suitors. The Nashville society was good to them and the family was well respected.

## **Memphis Society**

The Memphis Society called the Carver sisters wild. Mother went to parties and joined clubs, but not for the same reasons as she had in Nashville. She considered Memphis to be inferior somehow. Memphis never measured up to Nashville's standings.

## **Memphis Airport**

The airport was where Phillip met his sisters or Alex at the beginning of each trip. With his sisters, it is usually a source of embarrassment by their dress. With Alex, it is relief. His father makes the trip once. Phillip is surprised by the emotion his father shows at the time.

## **Clover pendant of Mother's**

Phillip is given the pendant by Mother to give to Clara Price. She leaves to South America before he can give it to her, but keeps it to himself. After several years and Father's death, Phillip gives it to Holly Kaplan.

## Social Concerns And Themes

A Summons to Memphis, Taylor's last novel, is an extended study of his principal theme, well represented in his other work: the familial strife that arises in the face of change.

The change in this family is caused by a move that the family makes early in the narrator's life from the old southern town of Nashville to the modern southern city of Memphis. This changes the lives of the narrator's sisters, severely limiting their chances of making good marriages, eventually leaving them unmarried and dissatisfied. The stress that ensues after the move drives the eldest son to enlist, fight in the war, and die. And it compels the narrator to partially alienate himself from the family and move to New York and adopt a non-Southern lifestyle.

## Techniques

Taylor's major technique is the nonchronological revelation of the complexity of family relations. There is much irony and much humor in the situations, but the narrator recognizes the humor and irony only in hindsight and conveys it ambiguously. Throughout his literary career, Taylor's technique has remained basically the same, as have his themes, giving the reader the feeling that he is seeing pieces of a life collected in random order and put together much like a large, complicated jigsaw puzzle.



# Themes

## Forgetting the Past

Phillip wanted to be able to forget the past hurts and decisions his father made against him. It took a lot of thinking and mulling over, but he understood it was all a part of the maturing process. He believed it was because of his father and his dealing away with Clara Price, that he never found another girl to love. He later found out his sisters had something to do with it. With their inability to forget the move and how both of their beaus were turned away by father, they remained in adolescence to some degree. They dressed outlandishly, played silly games, and in turn, interfered with other's lives. They did have independence and a successful business, but not mature in behavior.

At the Owl Mountain Inn, when Mr. Shackleford walks over to Father and they embrace without a word, it is a demonstration that forgetting can happen. Phillip is at first overcome by emotion, but then offended by this. How could he forget so easily when the betrayal by that man changed the outcome of all of their lives?

Phillip tries repeating the new mantra, 'forget, forget,' but when he finds out his sisters were somehow involved with the Clara Price breakup, he is stunned by their vengeance. He is shocked at the way he was treated by his family, those who were supposed to be his support system. He realized there was a wedge between all of them and he is ready to be back in his serene apartment in Manhattan. He is truly ready to forget.

## Vengeance

Betsy and Josephine, whether subconsciously or not, since we don't get their version of the tale, seek vengeance on their father. With Father putting an end to first Betsy's and then Josephine's romance, it ended their chances of marriage in their eyes.

In an effort to hurt Father, first they help Georgie get away to join the military. He ends up being killed in the line of duty. Phillip sneaks away to Manhattan and only visits Memphis on occasion when he is summoned. Phillip later wonders if their intent was to purposely drive both brothers away and isolate Father.

In wondering that, he recalls the Clara Price desertion. Was she driven away so Phillip would also feel the same pain as the sisters or did Father find her unworthy in some way? When he realizes at the Owl Mountain Inn that his sisters were involved in some way, he realizes the nature for their desire to have vengeance.

Phillip believes the desire for vengeance and not being able to forget leaves a person incapable of fully maturing. He also believes this is why the sisters are stuck wearing inappropriate clothing outside of work and the games they play when introducing new



dates to him. He believes they are partially locked in adolescence until they can learn to let go and forget the actions their father did.

In the end, they appear to have gotten their vengeance. Father does not get remarried, he does not get to visit Lewis Shackleford, and they both live with him. He is monitored by them every day, all day.

## **Where You Are vs. Who You Are**

The Carver family was not the same after the move from Nashville to Memphis. The girls each wanted to keep close ties with friends in Nashville, but Father wouldn't allow it. He wanted their Junior League memberships transferred and for them to find new friends. Mother had a new freedom since her children were now older, to look for activities. However, she began to withdraw herself from the world around her. Phillip was friends with Alex, but didn't participate in the usual activities of boys his age. Georgie was the only one who seemed to try and adapt to the new location.

The family seemed to remember what it was like in Nashville, instead of what it could be like in Memphis. They placed too much bearing on where you are from, instead of who you are. It was looked upon as a new life, instead of a location change within the same state. They viewed Memphis as second rate and that their society wasn't up to par as Nashville's.

Mother never came out of herself much. The girls were wild at parties and clubs. Georgie shut the family out. Phillip was introverted. Father seemed to get along without a hitch, until Mother died and the girls began to interfere in his life. Phillip liked his secluded life in Manhattan and realized he liked to be away from Memphis and the trappings of his family.



# Style

## Point of View

The story is told mainly as a flashback in the first person of Phillip Carver. There is very little dialogue unless it is recalled from a past event. Phillip tells about events of the past that he believes shaped how the present situation with his father is.

The last part of the story is still told in the first person point of view from Phillip, but in present day. The summons to Memphis is the point in the story from which it goes to his present situation.

As readers, we are given little, if any, insight into Josephine, Betsy, or Father. Occasionally, there is a bit of dialogue where we guess what Father is thinking, but not definitely.

## Setting

The majority of the story takes place in the past, through recollections of the narrator, and events in Memphis. There are also recollection scenes that take place in Nashville before the fateful move, St. Louis, the Shackelford home, and the route they drove from Nashville to Memphis.

Nashville of the past was a "southern" city, where Memphis did not appear as much so to the Carver family. Mother ridiculed some of its nightlife and the girls also mocked it. Phillip met Alex and then made the transition good enough. Georgie seemed to have the easiest time slipping in, picking up the dialect and manners, and getting on with his life.

The present is in the 1970's, in a Manhattan apartment where Phillip Carver lives. He travels to Memphis in the present and scenes take place in Father's house, Betsy and Josephine's homes, the clubs they attend for a short while, and miscellaneous areas of town. He spends a lot of time in the present traveling between the two and thinking about the past and how it has affected his life.

## Language and Meaning

The language used in *A Summons to Memphis* is straightforward and easy to read. Peter Taylor creates it as an easy conversation of someone recalling a tale to another person. The words and sentence structure are delivered by the main character Phillip, who is an educated man. The complex sentence structures and wide vocabulary used exemplify the education of the narrator.



## Structure

*A Summons to Memphis* is written in 12 chapters. The overall story is short, with just over 200 pages total. The structure is mostly prose of recollections of people and events. There is very little dialogue outside of recollections until the end of the story. The story starts at the present situation, which was in the 1970's at the time, and goes back through a series of events starting in the 1930's. Occasionally, the narrator makes a comment from the present, but then usually goes back to the past to make another point.

After reaching the present situation where he is summoned to Memphis, it follows "true time" of events that happened after. There are still occasionally recollections from the past, but more present is included to finish the tale.



## Quotes

Page 3 - "The courtship and remarriage of an old widower is always made more difficult when middle-aged children are involved - especially when there are unmarried daughters."

Page 16 - "Our removal proved to be a disaster for everyone except Father, I think."

Page 23 - "That was the day when she said she feared our move was going to be like the Cherokees' Trail of Tears."

Page 48 - "Five or six years later, in Memphis, it was hard to think of her as the same woman. I don't know still whether the trauma of the move changed her or whether the move from Nashville to Memphis merely happened to coincide with alterations in her mood and character."

Page 63 - "From their mid-forties forward, as a matter of fact, they dressed more like young girls than like their married contemporaries, some of whom were already grandmothers, of course, with half-grown grandchildren."

Page 73 - "His was by no means the simplest way of looking at the world, but it made him the best kind of friend I could have happened upon in my new life."

Page 87 - "Whatever she was like, no other girl ever delighted me as she did, and she must remain for those who never knew her simply the girl in Chattanooga I was beyond any question very profoundly in love with during that first year of War, must remain simply the girl whom my father, for needs and reasons of his own or out of a general confusion about the role he was entitled to play with regard to his children's selection of their mates, succeeded in preventing me from marrying."

Page 103 - "We ate together in the tile-floored breakfast room. I expressed my shame to her at running away in this Peter Pan fashion. And I based my excuse on the fear that Father would talk me out of going. He had never hesitated to use all his cunning as a courtroom lawyer to persuade his children to follow the course he prescribed."

Page 115 - "What I read between the lines of that letter, without knowing whether or not Alex himself understood it, was that the man escorting Betsy that night was none other than Alex's son Howard."

Page 127 - "I think that ordinarily I might have entered into my sisters' concerns about Father with a certain glee, though I would not certainly have considered going down to participate in whatever interference they were going to undertake against the betrothed pair."

Page 134 - "I knew that after first protecting Father from my sisters, I must then convert the two middle-aged women to my own views on forgetting wrongs done them by their



parents. 'Forget, forget,' I kept insisting silently, as if further to convince myself before confronting Betsy and Josephine."

Page 145 - "I was thinking also of my two sisters, wondering if by chance they might really have been concealed somewhat in the airport - behind some pillar, in some corner, behind some magazine rack or some food-vending machine - and if they really might yet manage to interfere with the nuptial plans of the old couple."

Page 157 - "It was as if standing in the doorway my sister had told me under her breath that once I was gone the two of them were planning to put a blanket over Father's old head and slowly smother him to death."

Page 181 - "I felt that Father's altogether human blindness could not be held against him. The dangerous ramifications that existed for his wife and children when he undertook to extricate himself from his embarrassing and humiliating situation in Nashville he could not have been expected to foresee."

Page 188 - "Then while my eyes were still lowered, a terrible thought struck me, an inescapable truth about the meddling interference of my old-maid sisters came home to me and a new insight as to the lengths they had been willing to go to revenge themselves upon their father, to wound him most deeply, to divide him forever from his two sons."

Page 192 - "I felt narrowness and cowardice about love was all due, inadvertently or otherwise, to my Father's treatment of me and Lewis's treatment of my father."



## Topics for Discussion

Does where you are from really make a difference as to who you will be?

Why is it important to learn the past in order to understand the present?

Were Josephine and Betsy truly acting out by dressing wildly and inappropriately at middle age?

Why did Georgie Carver run away to the war?

Why did Phillip Carver never marry?

To whose "side" did Alex belong?

Did George Carver get what he deserved by not remarrying?

What did the Clara Price situation do between Josephine, Betsy and Phillip?

## Literary Precedents

Taylor combines several traditions in his stories. His place in the southern tradition is obvious with his introversion, concentration on tradition, and scrutiny of private behavior. His preoccupation with psychology places him in the tradition of Henry James and others, although Taylor's style is quite dissimilar.

His short stories and novels are private rather than public, quiet rather than boisterous, contemplative rather than active. Readers more than likely will perceive the works as autobiographical in nature. However, this quality may be as much the effect Taylor's stories have upon the reader's identifying with events as it is the writer's personal story.

## Related Titles

In most of Taylor's work, his major concern is with change and the contrast that it produces between parents or grandparents and their children or grandchildren. Two of his short story collections, *In Miro District* (1974) and *The Old Forest* (1985) continue this theme.

In the title story, "In Miro District," the contrast is between a grandfather, who remembers Nashville by its ancient Spanish name, the Miro District, and his sometimes-wild grandson. In "The Captain's Son" the contrast is that of attitudes and lifestyles. The contrast and differing views often result in conflict. The conflict in families and between friends provides a poignant comment on life in an ever-changing South.

All of the narrators of these stories are males representative of the younger generation. In "The Captain's Son," the narrator tells the story of his sister's marriage to a man reared in Memphis, a city of the modern world. Lila, the sister, is soon corrupted by her aimless husband. "Brother," as the narrator is called, recognizes this fact first, commenting that alcohol is the culprit. Lila and her husband soon retreat to Memphis and to silence, while the narrator goes on with his life facing a less-than-bright future.

"In Miro District" is about a young man's exploits, mostly sexual, and his grandfather's tyranny. The grandfather actually is not a tyrant but an understanding old man who is less stern than most adults would be, given the circumstances. However, the gap between the grandfather and the grandson only widens as the young man grows older. The story ends with the young man's feelings of alienation and separation, revealing his lack of understanding of the character of his grandfather, the relative whom he probably most resembles.

Like *In Miro District*, *The Old Forest* concentrates on family relationships and conflicts. "The Old Forest" is the story of social perceptions and the strong will that one must have not to allow those perceptions to shape events. The conflict between parents and children is explored in "The Gift of the Prodigal," a conflict that provides an old man with a purpose — to be a confidante to a son whose problems give the old man a sense of being needed. "Two Ladies in Retirement" shows the contrast between the way of living in an older town and a new way of life in a modern city.

In "Two Ladies in Retirement," three generations engage in a genteel battle of wills. The oldest group is represented by two aging women, Miss Betty Pettigru and her companion and cousin, Mrs. Florence Blalock. Because they are alone, they must move from Nashville to St. Louis, where they live with Miss Betty's relatives, the James Tollivers, representing the next younger group. The youngest group consists of the Tolliver children: Jimmy, Vance, and Landon. The old ladies worship the children and try to maintain their Nashville lifestyle in this extended family.

Conflict soon arises, though. The servants' lives are disrupted when the old ladies move in; the order of the house changes; the boys change; and a showdown finally happens. The resolution is the realization that life cannot remain the same. All must change.



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