

Sarah Canary Study Guide

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Plot Summary

Sarah Canary is about a mysterious woman who appears in front of Chin, a Chinese worker, in the Washington Territories in the early 1870s. Her most marked characteristics are that she doesn't speak and that she is incredibly ugly. Chin is drawn to her, thinking she may be an immortal come to test him. His uncle tells him to take her away from their camp because they can't afford to have a white woman in their presence. Chin leads her away from the camp, equal parts leading and following her. Chin gets frustrated with the amount of noise Sarah makes and strikes her. As they begin to lose their way in the fog, Chin is knocked unconscious on a headstone and is separated from Sarah.

Chin finds Sarah at the Steilacoom Asylum, where he meets B.J., one of the residents, who hears inanimate objects speak to him from time to time. After the warden gets rough with Sarah, Sarah flees the asylum with Chin and B.J. in tow. They make their way through the forest, encountering Will Purdy, a postmaster, who introduced them to his friend Harold, a man who manages unusual creatures in freak shows. He gives up the embalmed mermaid he has been traveling with in exchange for Sarah, declaring that she is a wild woman.

Separated from Chin and B.J., Sarah is subjected to appearing on stage as the Alaskan Wild Woman. When she doesn't prove to be a crowd pleaser, Harold makes sexual advance toward her. Adelaide Dixon, a feminist lecturer, is scandalously traveling alone, interrupts Harold. Harold is staged during the altercation with the women and Adelaide flees with Sarah, thinking she is Lydia Palmer, a woman who escaped from San Francisco after murdering her husband.

Sarah and Adelaide cross paths with Chin, B.J., and Purdy. Adelaide makes sure they get away from the men. They flee to catch a boat away from the men. Chin, B.J., and Purdy go after them after finding Harold has been stabbed. Purdy agrees to take Chin and B.J. to get a canoe to make their way. While the men negotiate with Sam Clams, an Indian, Sam spots Harold stealing one of his canoes. Sam and the men, along with Sam's wife Old Patsy, go in pursuit of the women and Harold.

A storm causes both canoes to capsize. Chin and B.J. are picked up by the same steamboat that Adelaide and Sarah are traveling on. They discover that a stowaway is on the boat as well. Adelaide learns from a newspaper that the real Lydia Palmer has been captured. When she speaks with B.J., she learns Sarah's identity, so far as B.J. and Chin know it. They disembark in San Francisco in hopes of getting Sarah to a women's rescue mission. Harold kidnaps Adelaide thinking he's captured Sarah. He offers Chin and B.J. a trade. During the trade, Sarah disappears without a trace.

Adelaide attends the trial of Lydia Palmer and sees her acquitted. During an angry mob outside their hotel, B.J. is killed. Adelaide hires a detective to find Sarah and Chin returns to China.



Section i, chapters 1-2; section ii, chapters 3-4

Summary

Section i sets the novel in post-American Civil War. It establishes the mood, references the abduction of Abraham Lincoln's body, meteor showers, and ghostly apparitions. It also introduces the Steilacoom Asylum and sets the stage for a woman to enter a Chinese railway workers' camp.

Chapter one, titled "The Year of the Rooster", opens with, as the other chapters do, a selection of Emily Dickenson's work. It then opens in winter with Chin Ah Kin building a fire in a makeshift camp. He looks up and sees a woman who is speaking incoherently. He wonders if it's another language and then thinks she may be a ghost woman who has come to lure him away. He then guesses she may be a prostitute, but he's not seen a white prostitute before. Sarah, though she has not been named as such yet, is the ugliest woman Chin has ever seen. She has short dark hair, a long nose, hair on her upper lip, and scars on the side of her cheek. Chin's uncle tells him to take her away and Chin considers she may be looking for opium. Chin's uncle doesn't think it's a good time to have the woman in the camp, but Chin can't think of another. The gold rush has died down and the Chinese are thought to be suited only for railroad work. Chin suggests the woman may be an immortal come to test him. Wong Woon, another man in the camp, claims Sarah is crazy and that she belongs at the Steilacoom Asylum. Chin wants to offer her a blanket and food; his uncle wants her gone. He also says that if she doesn't leave, someone will have to marry her eventually.

Chin gives her food. He opts to take her to Steilacoom, but the woman resists going but then reluctantly goes with him. Chin knows they won't reach Steilacoom before nightfall. They come to a lake and discover they've gone too far and must cross the creek. She wants to stop at the creek, but Chin insists they continue. Chin sees two small Indian children. Chin fears the Indians because the Indians killed the Chinese when they first arrived. He also heard of an incident where Indians drove a camp of Chinese miners over a cliff. They continue toward the ocean and are surrounded by fog. Chin is paranoid that Indians may be around them and Sarah continues making noises; she won't be quiet. Chin hits her and tells her to be quiet. He immediately apologizes. Sarah moves away from him and disappears into the fog. He asks for forgiveness and tries to find her. He falls and hits his hand on a gravestone. He feels something grab his foot and throw him against the stone and he loses consciousness.

Chapter two, titled "A Full Moon in Steilacoom", Chin wakes in a room with bars on the window. Jeb Chambers and two women are in the room, along with an Indian called Tom. One of the women asks Chin if he's Christian. Jeb tells her she doesn't want Chin because he attacked a white woman and that the attack left the woman mad. Jeb tells Chin that Tom is being put to death for killing a Chinese man. He leaves the two men



together for the night. Tom watches the full moon through the window and tells Chin he isn't going to kill him. They talk about Chin's experience in the graveyard and striped horses. Chin asks who wants him to kill Tom. Tom explains that Jeb Chambers and Hank Webber are a judge and doctor, respectively. Tom also speaks of how he will never see the moon again. They talk about foot binding in China and that Indians can take multiple wives. Chin promises to show Tom something he's never seen before. An owl is heard above the window and Tom is excited to hear it. Tom asks Chin not to speak the name Tom after his death because it's not his true name.

In the morning, Hank Webber shows up and introduces himself to Chin. He explains that they want Chin to kill Tom because it sends a message: if someone kills a Chinaman, a Chinaman kills that person. All Chin has to do is put the rope around Tom's neck before the hanging. Before the hanging, Chin suggests that Tom is about to see something he's never seen before. Once the hanging is over, Chin is free to go.

Section ii discusses sanity, God, and hysteria. It references the work of Dr. James Carr who conducted experiments in 1873, notably on frogs and their mating rituals.

Chapter three, titled "Morning at the Steilacoom Asylum" opens with Dr. Carr's regimen for the patients at the asylum. There are three parts to the regimen: hearty food, exercise, and music and dance. Hank Webber is one of the superintendents and speaks with Dr. Carr about Sarah; Dr. Carr has only had a brief examination of her. B.J., one of the patients, works with Dr. Carr. He was admitted the previous October. They discuss Sarah. Dr. Carr considers Sarah to have the facial features of the criminally insane. He also indicates that Sarah had recently menstruated and that a woman naturally wanted to procreate, but during menstruation may actually want to kill. B.J. and Dr. Carr discuss an article about a woman who married an Indian. B.J. suggests that the woman rode a horse because of penis envy. Later in the conversation, ink blots are referenced. When the conversation returns to Sarah, B.J. observes that Sarah, while dirty, wears clothes that indicate she may have had money at one time. He sees Sarah and tells her to go back to her room.

B.J. meets Chin and wonders how one would know if a Chinaman was insane because all Chinamen are insane. William Ross, a former cook, is also a patient at the asylum. He acts like a warden and B.J. is afraid of him. Dr. Carr recommended Ross' release weeks earlier, but Ross remained. He carries a large knife and B.J. hallucinates that the knife speaks to him, telling him that it wants different things: potatoes, turnips, and Chin's braid. It also tells him not to speak to Sarah.

Chapter four, titled "Dr. Carr's Theories on Animal Magnetism", continues in the asylum. Ada, a German woman, comes into the dining room with Sarah. She tells B.J. that her name is Sarah Canary because she sings. Later, B.J. tells Dr. Carr that Ada is in love with him. Dr. Carr discusses the differences between men and women and how the male brain is superior to the female's brain and that educating men and women similarly is a mistake.



When B.J. sees Ada again, Ada is correcting Sarah's manners while she eats. Houston, the warden, disapproves of the mess Sarah has made. He blames Ada and pulls her up by the neck and drags her away. B.J. can hear her gurgling. Chin asks B.J. if things like that happen often. They talk and Chin asks if Sarah has been assigned a job. The female warden comes to take Sarah to see the doctor. B.J. eats what remains of Sarah's breakfast.

With Sarah in the patient's chair, Dr. Carr calls B.J. in for help; he wants to hypnotize Sarah. He thinks that if she can sign that she may actually be able to speak. Sarah swallows the pocket watch; Dr. Carr has hold of the end of the chain. Dr. Carr offers to trade the watch for a peppermint. He gets the watch and puts it in his pocket along with the candy.

Later, B.J. escorts Sarah back to her room and Houston inserts himself between them, raising his hand to strike B.J. Sarah bites Houston and runs away from them. B.J. finds Chin helping Sarah escape. B.J. follows, but Chin doesn't want to be responsible for him; he only made the promise to Sarah. Sarah makes a run for it and Chin and B.J. are left following in her wake.

Analysis

This first section establishes the time period as post-Civil War. It gives information about things considered out of the norm, even bizarre. It references the plot to steal Lincoln's body, certainly an oddity in American history. It also references ghosts, giving the reader a sense of other-worldliness. In identifying the Steilacoom Asylum, the reader is also informed that the places in the novel may be real places. While the events that take place are not factual, they are set in a reality that heightens the story and suggests that these are things could very well have taken place. By mixing information about real places and things that are largely dismissed – such as apparitions – it allows the reader the opportunity to come to their own conclusion. Perhaps Sarah is a ghost woman, perhaps not, but in this establishing section, it offers up possibility.

The first chapter is called "The Year of the Rooster", while this references Chin's cultural heritage by beginning the story around the time of the Chinese New Year, it is interesting to note that the rooster is a masculine bird. The novel opens by celebrating man. This indirectly introduces the theme of feminism or sexism (depending on how you look at it). Women will work and fight against the dominating culture of men throughout the book. This play on words at the opening allows the reader to clearly understand that it's a man's world.

The theme of language is first introduced when Sarah meets Chin. The reader doesn't know how Sarah got there or from where. Her origin is a complete mystery. Chin doesn't hear her approach and he doesn't see or hear anyone else. It's as though she has magically materialized. Sarah makes noises and while Chin doesn't recognize the language – if indeed it is one – he is familiar enough with other languages to know that while he may not be able to understand the words or sounds being made, he can



identify that the sounds may make sense. Sarah is communicating, but it isn't necessarily clear that she's communicating directly with him. There isn't a scene of the two of them coming to an understanding of a word for an object, which is a familiar trope in fiction and film alike. The reader comes to understand that Sarah's main way of communicating is by her presence. She will run away from him and return repeatedly over the course of the novel. She is equal parts fleeing and luring. This becomes her de facto language.

When Chin takes her back to the camp, his uncle's immediate reaction is to get her away from the camp. He refuses to let her stay. He doesn't even want to share food or shelter with her. The men discuss whether she is a drug addict and this is something they don't want in their camp, never mind that they would be unable to provide for her needs if that is the case.

The larger concern speaks to the theme of race. The men are concerned, as Chinese immigrants, with what the implications and consequences are for Chinese men to have a lone white woman in their company. Chin's uncle mentions that if she were to stay that someone would have to marry her. Chin understands that this obligation is his if it comes to that, but this isn't what he wants. He wants her gone, yet he feels a responsibility for her. Part of that may stem from his projection on her of her being an immortal or a ghost woman come to seduce him. This stems from his culture, relating to the theme of race, but it also gives him a sense of purpose. There is honor in helping the woman. Additionally, he would see a woman as the weaker sex in need of a man's help. The theme of feminism is addressed in how Chin assumes responsibility for a woman he deems helpless.

Aside for her lack of an identifiable language, Sarah's most marked characteristic is the way she looks. Often female characters are introduced and immediately praised for their beauty. The opposite is true for Sarah. She is described as the ugliest woman Chin has ever seen. With this in mind, the reader must confront the value that is put upon appearance socially. If a woman is renowned for her beauty is she more worthy of saving? Is Chin's decision to help an ugly woman an admirable trait? Chin entertains the possibility that if Sarah is a ghost woman or an enchantress, she may be ugly and still try to seduce. If he stays with her, he may then be rewarded by her transforming into someone beautiful. This marginalizes Sarah and makes her appearance about Chin. If Chin does the right thing, he will be rewarded; if he does not ill luck may befall him. This highlights the theme of feminism.

The theme of race can also be seen in how Chin reacts to seeing the Indian children. Chin is afraid of the Indians. He has heard stories of Indians luring Chinese workers off a cliff to their death. Further, he is aware that the Indians don't like the Chinese. Instead of greeting a new culture with acceptance, the Indians reacted unfavorably after their experiences with the white man. In light of what the reader likely knows about the history of the settlers and the Native Americans, this seems a logical, if not extreme, reaction to newcomers. It demonstrates how deeply rooted issues with race relations are in America.



Chin is directly confronted with his feelings about Indians when he ends up in the jail with Tom. The reader never learns Tom's given name, instead only knows him by the Anglo name that was given to him. Chin and Tom are able to talk, even though the guard has established that Tom has already killed a Chinaman and is about to be hanged for his crime. Tom puts Chin's fears to rest by explaining that he isn't going to kill Chin. He does, however, understand that Chin is going to kill him. This isn't something Chin wants to do, but rather it's something he has to do. Because he is Chinese, he lacks power in the territory. If a white man tells him he must kill Tom, then for fear of repercussions he is left with the responsibility. The two men discuss aspects of each others culture. While nothing Tom says outright speaks to feminist enlightenment, he does have a problem with the foot-binding in Chinese culture. Chin doesn't have a problem with it, likely because this is something that he's seen throughout his life and regards as normal. This conversation foreshadows a revelation about Chin in the final moments of the novel.

During their conversation, the theme of nature is explored. Tom, as is likely expected from a Native American character, holds nature in high reverence. He watches the moon from the window and muses on never seeing it again. In this way, he gives the moon to Chin. Chin promises to look at the moon for him as though that could or should make up for killing him. Tom also hears an owl, which can be a harbinger of death for some tribes.

In the Steilacoom Asylum, the reader can find evidence of the theme of sexuality. B.J. and Dr. Carr both discuss penis envy in woman, discuss the notion that all women want to procreate, and how menstruation may cause women to want to kill instead of procreate. These ideas are likely ridiculous to the contemporary reader demonstrating the progress women have made. Yet, feminism and female sexuality are topics that are being discussed even in today's culture.

Later, when Dr. Carr tries to hypnotize Sarah to see if she is able to speak, Sarah swallows the pocket watch. Dr. Carr is able to keep hold of the end of the chain, but is shocked and horrified by her swallowing the watch. Sarah's act speaks to the act of sexuality. In doing this she has exerted her power in the presence of them men.

It is also noted by Dr. Carr that there is a difference in brain size in men and woman. Since women have a smaller brain, educating women in a similar way to men seems illogical to Dr. Carr. He views women as a lesser species than a man. This antiquated notion supports the theme of sexism.

B.J. has been told that all Chinamen are insane. This is a nod to the theme of race, as stereotyping an entire race is bound to be inaccurate.

Discussion Question 1

What does Chin's theory that Sarah is a ghost woman reveal about his character?



Discussion Question 2

Why does Tom ask Chin to show him something he's never seen before?

Discussion Question 3

Why does B.J. believe that Ada is in love with him?

Vocabulary

seances, posthumously, incarnations, eunuchs, mundane, corporeal, apparition, sluicing, dilation, tinctures, disingenuous, abacus, insidious, inertia, intonations, coquettish, emetic, din, approximations, queue, sibilants, lecher, omen, bisecting, derision, frugal, prophetic, anteroom, potency, malevolent, crescendo, processions, agitate, prognosis, intransigent, gyrational, austere, derivatives, delusion, tonic, insoluble, delirious, monomania, lucid, diastema, virile, precedents, guttural, demur, boxty, insinuatingly, liable, idiophrenic, cranial, ascribe, bordello, tyranny, catatonia, recalcitrant, barracks, subalterns, culpability, impediment, cataleptic, epigastrium, dictum, arrhythmical, menace



Section iii, chapters 5-6; section iv, chapters 7-8

Summary

Section iii begins with the story of a young boy who went missing from Winnipeg and was found months later having been cared for by a female badger. Before the incident, the boy was introverted, but returned extroverted. Other nature studies are referenced, including an aquarium that was built in 1872, how baby alligators became fashionable; the alligators died within a few weeks of purchase and were then turned into jewelry.

Chapter five, titled “The Story of Su Tung-P’O, opens with Chin observing nature, from trees and ants to a dead squirrel. He thinks about what he’s been through over the previous two days: not eating, suffering a head wound, killing Tom, and kidnapping Sarah. B.J. asks if there’s a safe place to stay overnight; Chin doesn’t know of any. They continue walking and Chin thinks about Tom telling him how the earth will talk. Sarah stops and urinates in the creek, catches a frog, and puts flowers in her hair.

B.J. and Chin follow along. B.J. starts to feel ill, needing to eat and take his medication. Chin looks around for Sarah. At the mention of being hungry, Chin and B.J. eat some bread, but Chin becomes concerned about where Sarah is. They talk and Chin decides they should go look for Sarah. Chin isn’t sure why he’s following an ugly, crazy woman, but they continue looking for her, even though he’s happy she’s gone.

They encounter Burke in the woods and he asks if they are looking for him. Chin says they’re on their way to Tenino. Burke asks where they’ve come from and B.J. tells him Steilacoom and asks if he’s seen a woman. Burke muses about not getting used to losing a woman. He explains that they were closer to Tenino when they were at Steilacoom and that they needed to go back. Burke offers to take them back to his cabin for the night and they run into Sarah along the way. Chin tells her he’s happy to see her and she remains silent.

Chapter six, titled “Burke’s Theories on God and Darwin” finds the group at Burke’s cabin. It has wood walls and a dirt floor. Burke introduces them to his friend Harold, explaining that he goes long stretches of time without seeing anyone and then ends up spoiled for company. They share whiskey and talk. It begins to pour outside. Chin thinks about Tom and how there will be no moon this night. Harold thinks it’s strange that Chin, B.J. and Sarah are in the woods without a definitive destination. Burke offers Sarah whiskey after she grabs a piece of bread off the floor. Chin explains that she doesn’t talk.

While the conversation continues, Chin surveys the room and understands that he needs to remember that he doesn’t have any friends in the room because of his race. Harold discusses how the Chinese are interested only in themselves. He tells a story



about an explosives accident in a mine and how the Chinese workers passed by the injured man for fear that they would be docked wages if they stopped to help him. They only helped after they were assured that they wouldn't lose money.

Burke compliments Chin's English and he shows Chin a stone he keeps in a jar: Chin identifies it as dragon's tooth and claims it is valuable. It's a fossilized tooth and the men discuss what animal it may have belonged to. B.J. asks if any of them have seen a flea circus. Burke suggests that Sarah is a homo sapiens ferus, or wild woman. He asks a series of questions, including whether she is capable of recognizing herself in a mirror. He also suggests that she may have wandered off from an attempt to civilize her. Burke talks about the process of civilizing and some thoughts on Darwin. He suggests that from a scientific standpoint, it makes better sense to treat women as a less-evolved version of a man.

They go to sleep and B.J. goes to get an extra blanket and uncovers what he is told is an embalmed mermaid from Australia; it has an agonized-looking face and a fish tail. Harold claims the mermaid as his. Burke considers keeping Sarah and civilizing her, but decides it's an impossible task. He later admits to Chin that he created the mermaid for Harold by putting together a monkey and a salmon and adding human hair and breasts. He calls it a perversion and claims he never should have created it. They sleep.

In the morning, Chin eats a bowl of mush and thinks about the possibility of B.J. marrying Sarah if necessary and then leave them both behind. B.J. wakes Sarah up. When she doesn't move, B.J. pulls the blanket back to discover the mermaid and that Sarah is gone.

Section iv tells of Julia Pastrana who was regarded as the ugliest woman in the world. She had a beard, a hairy body, and a second row of teeth. She fell in love with her manager, with whom she traveled around to freak shows. They fell in love and married. She and her child died after she gave birth, but she claimed that she died happy because she had been loved.

Chapter seven, "The Wild Woman Performs in Seabeck" introduces Adelaide Dixon, a feminist lecturer. The men of Seabeck, Washington could choose to hear Adelaide speak or see the Alaskan Wild Woman. Adelaide's lectures included ideas that women should not only have multiple sexual partners, but should also enjoy sex as well. The Alaskan Wild Woman was introduced as having been raised by wolves. Dialogue from the two events is briefly interspersed, illustrating the wildness of the uncivilized woman and the sexual appetites of women. The men are disappointed in the wild woman show because Sarah just stands there. They suggest giving her raw meat and making her howl. Sarah begins making clicking sounds and the men laugh at her. She hums and then sings. Harold hits her and knocks her to her knees and the show ends.

Chapter eight, "Harold Recites Tennyson" picks up after the wild woman show. Harold locks Sarah in her room and is asked to join the men in saloon. He doesn't think it's working out with Sarah and contemplates taking her back to Steilacoom. He thinks about leaving her somewhere safe and going back for the mermaid. One of the men



sees Adelaide going to her room; men in the bar discuss her. Harold introduces himself to Will Purdy and Jim Allen. Jim comments that a man doesn't have to ask if the woman enjoys herself if he is paying. Purdy says a woman can coax anything out of man with the right approach. They continue to drink and Harold reaches his threshold for being around the men in the bar.

Harold heads upstairs and finds Sarah watching out the window. She ignores him and he continues to drink and stumbles onto the window seat next to her. He takes her ankle and begins to recite from Tennyson's "Lady of Shalott." He reaches up her dress and she kicks him. He pulls her foot between his legs and tells her she owes him. She kicks again. They tussle and he tells her to be a good girl and even tells her he loves her. She runs from him, hiding, using the mirror to deceive him from her location. He grabs her, but lets her go when he finds he's been stabbed with a chopstick.

Analysis

The story about the boy being raised by a badger is said to be a true story that happened in the early 1870s. This establishes how the world is learning of different oddities. With this story in mind, the characters, and by extension the reader, can understand the logic behind thinking that Sarah may be a wild woman. This is direction the novel is headed in, especially when Sarah meets Harold. Before this happens, the reader finds Chin, B.J. and Sarah on the run after fleeing the Steilacoom Asylum. They spend much of their time together in nature, looking for shelter and trying to survive. Sarah runs ahead of them and the men are tasked with locating her. Chin questions why he wants to find her because he's happy she's gone. When he considers this, he thinks about how he's chasing after an ugly woman as if an ugly woman isn't worthy of his efforts. The theme of feminism and sexuality are both supported by this.

The theme of nature is witnessed by how the group makes their way through the forest. Chin observes the nature around him, noting the trees, bugs, etc. It gives him time to reflect on his experience with Tom. It's not so much that killing Tom haunts him, but rather Tom's life - or rather his perspective - that haunts him. Suddenly, he's tasked with observing nature in ways he wouldn't have otherwise. Tom taught him that the earth speaks and, for perhaps the first time, Chin is listening. He may not understand exactly how to speak back, but he begins to see the point in listening. This also supports the theme of language and communication.

Sarah returns after Chin and B.J. encounter Burke. He offers to help them and give them shelter for the night. At his cabin, the group meets Harold. The theme of nature is evidenced when it begins to pour outside. This prompts Chin to think of Tom and how there won't be a visible moon.

The theme of race can be seen in how Chin relates to the other men in the room. He becomes hyper-aware of his being Chinese. He understands that he cannot trust or befriend the men in the room, even if no one has indicated anything other than kindness. Chin understands his position as an outsider. He shares this with Sarah,



whether she understands that or not. She is even further removed from the group - or rather, isn't part of the group at all. She grabs food off of the floor, she takes a blanket without asking, and fends for herself. She is discussed, however.

Which leads to the theme of feminism. Burke discusses Darwinism, which readers should readily recognize and be familiar with. Yet Burke has some ideas of his own: namely that women are a less-evolved version of a man. This reinforces the control men have over women and outwardly rejects any claims a woman may have for equality. Sarah appears to understand the men while they're talking. This speaks to the differences between men and women and how women are able to understand men, but men are reluctant to understand women. Because of this confusion - or unwillingness to understand - women are marginalized and seen as a lesser species.

It's not surprising then when Burke reveals that he has created the mermaid that Harold displays. It marginalizes his view of women. He has created something in a feminine form and regards it as an abomination, at one point referring to it as a "false idol". Perhaps this gives insight into his past relationships with women; he indicated that he had lost women before.

Harold has been duped into thinking the mermaid is real, but Burke put it together. He expresses regret over doing so, but doesn't confess his deception to Harold. Instead he does it to a Chinese man, a mentally ill man, and in front of a woman who lacks a way to communicate. Harold would be able to dismiss their claims that the mermaid was fabricated because people wouldn't believe anything from that group. Burke calls the creation an abomination. It seems as though he regrets creating it. This references the theme of nature by calling out its unnaturalness.

Burke also suggests that Sarah may be a wild woman, which would also be considered an abomination. He asks questions about whether she recognizes her reflection in the mirror and posits that she may have left a place that was trying to civilize her. This may account for the quality of her clothing, but none of his questions lead to identifying Sarah. He doesn't express interest in understanding or helping her. Rather, he wants to classify her as one would do with any creature encountered in the natural world.

In section iv, the reader learns of Julia Pastrana, a bearded woman who was regarded as the ugliest woman in the world. Readers will quickly make the parallel between Sarah and Julia. What is learned about Julia is that she was loved and that made her happy. She was accepted by someone for herself, regardless of appearance. This may indicate to the reader that this foreshadows Sarah's fate. It works conversely, though. In keeping with the theme of feminism, Sarah is not looking for companionship or someone to accept her the way she is. She isn't looking to be defined by a relationship. She is independent and autonomous.

This section precedes the introduction of Adelaide Dixon. Her presence in the novel embodies feminism. She is outspoken and dedicated to her cause and the cause of all women. Dialogue from Adelaide's lecture and from Sarah's first and only appearance as the Wild Woman of Alaska are juxtaposed, illustrating the objectification of women and



how they are treated as second-class citizens. This gives the reader an opportunity to see how clearly the story lines of two women who have never met intersect. The theme of sexuality is also demonstrated by how the dialogue examines the wildness of one character with the notion that women can want and enjoy sex. This also harkens back to Dr. Carr's suggestion that all women want to procreate. His comment indicates that women use sex as a means to an ends, not for pleasure.

The men in the saloon have disparaging things to say about Adelaide's lecture. One man suggests that women are able of manipulating men with their sexuality, another suggests that he's not responsible for her pleasure if he's paying for his own.

Once Adelaide goes up to her room, she interrupts Harold's attack on Sarah. Sarah does not submit to Harold and fights off his advances. This is likely expected by the reader. When Harold is stabbed with the chopstick, it isn't clearly stated what happened. Because of the chopstick, it is a logical leap to assume that Chin may have stabbed Harold. Because Chin gave Sarah chopsticks to eat with earlier, it makes similar sense that Sarah would stab him as well. The reader soon learns that neither case is true. Because of the nature of Harold's attempted crime, it is fitting that he is stabbed. While he tries to convince her that she owes him, manipulate her by suggesting that he loves her, and subsequently tries to rape her, Harold ends up being the one penetrated by the chopstick.

During Harold's attempt at seduction, he recites from Tennyson's "Lady of Shalott." While each of the chapters includes a selection of Emily Dickenson's poetry, this is the first poetry included in the text of the novel. It is a poem written by a man and recited by man, suggesting that it is a man's poetry that belongs in this world.

Discussion Question 1

How does the story of the boy being raised by a badger influence the reader's impression of Sarah's situation?

Discussion Question 2

Would Chin feel differently about Sarah if she were beautiful?

Discussion Question 3

Why does Burke suggest that women should be treated as a less-evolved man?

Vocabulary

ambidexterity, promenade, guilt, cavernous, ambiguous, scruples, incessant, ravenous, prudent, scabrous, canny, fissures, celestial, feral, aversion, intoxicants, cursory,



savagery, implausible, concede, fauna, anguish, decipher, gallant, miscegenation, abject, alleviated, unscrupulous, nondescript, simian, epitaph, enigma, ineluctable, pathos, misbegotten, sated, brazen



Section v, chapters 9-11; section vi, chapters 12-13

Summary

Section v introduces Victoria Woodhull and her promotion of free love and references “Anna Karenina”. It also states that in 1873 the Association for the Advancement of Women was founded.

Chapter nine, “Adelaide’s Theories on Seduction” reveals that Adelaide saw Sarah and recognized her profile as Lydia Palmer, a woman who murdered her husband. Adelaide reflects on how she toured with Louise, who fell in and got married. Adelaide continued the tour unescorted, which caused a scandal. Adelaide heard the commotion in Sarah’s room and interrupted the scuffle between Sarah and Harold, during which Sarah got her hands on a gun. Adelaide stabbed Harold, disarmed Sarah, and took her to her room for the night. Sarah, who is referred to as Lydia in this chapter, falls asleep.

Adelaide considers what she’ll do if Harold wants Sarah back in the morning. She also reflects on the story she heard about Lydia and her husband and how he cheated on her. She writes about Lydia, dismissing that Lydia’s actions were normal. Since Lydia’s disappearance from San Francisco, men postulated that normal reactions to betrayal were suicide and prostitution. Adelaide hears men shouting and glass breaking in the saloon downstairs. She wakes Sarah and tells her they’re leaving, fearful that men are coming after them.

They go out the back window and must descend a tree. Purdy calls up to her, telling her that there aren’t many women in Washington. She tries to climb back up the tree, but slips from the tree. Sarah is in the tree above them. She jumps and lands more gracefully than Adelaide. Adelaide keeps the gun that she took from Sarah hidden from Purdy. He stops them from leaving, explaining that he’s only trying to collect the money for the room. Adelaide hears the other men in the room upstairs. Sarah takes off running toward the footbridge. Adelaide threatens Purdy with the gun to keep him from stopping them. Purdy follows. Sarah makes her way across the creek and into the woods with skill. Purdy taunts Adelaide about her not liking men much and telling her that she has ink on her face and that she’d look prettier without it. She considers how she’s afraid, yet she’s the one in possession of a gun. She instructs Purdy to take his gun out and throw it into the creek and asks for his knife. She continues across the footbridge, but is startled by another man stepping onto the bridge from the other side: Chin. He apologizes, having mistaken her for someone else. B.J. calls out and asks if Adelaide is the Alaskan Wild Woman. She tells Chin and B.J. to cross and go stand with Purdy. With the men on the other side, Adelaide cuts the knots on the footbridge so that it falls away. She leaves in hope to catch the sloop. Before sunrise, she catches up with Sarah.



Chapter ten, “Morning at the Bay View Hotel” finds Purdy, Chin, and B.J. talking about the sloops; Purdy admits they haven’t been used for the mail in years. Purdy also explains that the creek will drop enough for them to cross when the tide is out. Chin stays outside of the hotel while B.J. goes in to talk to the owner, telling him to ask the owner if the man with the Alaskan Wild Woman is named Harold. Purdy tells Jenny, a half-Indian girl, that Adelaide cut the footbridge; she goes to tell Bill Blair, the owner. Chin contemplates whether he will ever see his uncle again and thinks that he will tell him that a ghost took his soul. He’s not sure, however, if the ghost is Tom or Sarah. Blair greets the men and offers them a bit of breakfast and whiskey. He explains that he let Adelaide stay at the hotel because another woman was in the hotel. He asks if B.J. is a friend or a creditor of Harold’s. Blair tells them Harold’s room is at the top of the stairs. Purdy follows them and Chin and B.J. start upstairs. They go to Sarah’s room and find clothing laid out on a blanket in the shape of a woman. Chin climbs out the open window and onto the roof.

Chapter eleven, “The Story of Carmilla” reveals Harold leaning against the bedframe, looking pale and weak. He drops the chopstick out of his hand. He asks Chin what the characters on the chopstick mean: “Good fortune. Long life.” Chin picks up it and recognizes the chopstick as his own. Harold claims Sarah stabbed him with it. He asks where Sarah went. Harold asks how many men have died since Chin found Sarah in the forest. B.J. tells him Louis Bergevain was beaten to death by the wardens and tells them that there is another dead man on the stairs. Chin goes to look and finds a man killed by a kitchen knife. Harold suggests that Sarah is a vampire instead of a wild woman. Harold demands that Chin tell him where Sarah has gone or he’ll tell Blair that Chin killed the man and stabbed him. Chin relents and tells him that she left with another woman. Harold thinks it’s fitting that Sarah would leave with another woman, referencing Carmilla, a vampire story of the time. Harold takes the chopstick from Chin and disappears down the stairs. He encounters Blair who tells him Adelaide is to blame for Sarah’s disappearance. Chin and B.J. flee through the window and find Purdy on the walkway asking if they paid for breakfast. Chin offers to pay Purdy instead. They discuss money, but Chin doesn’t have much. Purdy tells them that if they pay him for breakfast, he’ll get them across the creek, and help them hire an Indian canoe. Chin agrees to the deal and they venture across the creek. At a shanty, Purdy hires a canoe from Sam Clams, an Indian. Sam won’t take them out in the canoe because of the wind and tells them to buy the canoe and go it alone. He offers them the smaller canoe, but Purdy only wants to rent it. Sam sees another man – Harold – and asks why he is stealing his canoe.

Section vi, discusses Major Isaac I. Stevens, the governor of the Washington Territories, and Chief Seattle. It also references the Mad House, a brothel run by John Pennell. By 1873, the Chinese occupied the section of Seattle where the Mad House was located. Most Indians dressed like white men and lived in houses.

Chapter twelve, “A Rainy Day on Hood Canal” opens at Sam’s house. B.J. knows a lot about Indians from Steilacoom. Dr. Carr told him that the Indians were rarely insane. A blanket starts to speak to B.J. about a coyote and a raven. The story is familiar to him, but he knows it as the story of Pandora’s Box. Sam relents and allows the men to rent



the canoe and go with him on the condition that they help recover his other canoe. He says his wife Old Patsy will paddle. A thunderstorm rolls in and they make their way out to the water. The water splashes up over the gunwale. Chin spots a canoe in a tree and asks about it. B.J. explains that the Indians bury their dead in canoes.

Chapter thirteen "The Story of the Dragon's Gate" finds the group on the canoe, half-way on their journey. Purdy suggests they would be able to travel faster if they moved away from the coast; Sam says it's too dangerous. Old Patsy packed a lunch before they left and B.J. pulls some crackers out of a handkerchief. The canoe tips, scattering the crackers in the water. The rain stops and later starts pouring again. Purdy claims he tried to explain to Adelaide that she wasn't in danger at the hotel and that she simply chose to leave. Chin tells a story about the Dragon's Gate, which reminds B.J. of a story about a man being granted three wishes. B.J. asks Chin if he's ever seen a dragon. Purdy talks about women and how they take advantage of their position. He has even seem a woman ride with a horse between her legs. Purdy talks about how Indians and how Blair is a half-breed. He explains that the half-breed have been able to achieve positions of power, whereas full-blooded Indians have not been granted the same opportunities.

Chin spots something in the water and stands up in the canoe; Sam scolds him and Purdy dismisses it as a log. They talk about Jim Allen's murder and Harold's stabbing and how if Chin had stayed he would have been lynched. Purdy explains that it's easier for the community to handle something like murder when it's done by an outsider and Chin would have served that purpose. The conversation continues and Purdy finally sees that the object in the water is Harold's capsized canoe. Chin finds Harold's whiskey flask; he reaches for it and the canoe tips. Purdy falls on top of Chin and Sam tells them to lean to correct the tilt. They struggle and the canoe capsizes. B.J. is in the water and feels like he's being pulled in two directions, unsure of what to do. He finally gets to the surface with Chin. Purdy asks if they can all swim, acknowledging that they'll all freeze if they stay put. B.J. and Chin stay behind while Purdy and Sam and Old Patsy swim to shore.

Analysis

For background information, section v discusses Victoria Woodhull who was a candidate for president of the United States for the Spiritualists. Her thoughts on free love extended to questioning why women shouldn't expect to be able to have sex openly if men could. The section ends with acknowledging the creation of the Association for the Advancement of Women. This takes place in 1873, something that would have taken place in and around the time of the setting of the novel. Juxtaposing the advancement of women with the story of a women who advocated for women to behave equally to men foreshadows a later development between Chin and Adelaide.

The theme of feminism is evident at the start of chapter nine. The reader learns that Adelaide hasn't always traveled alone to do her lectures. At one point she had a traveling companion named Louise. Louis got married after she fell in love with a man.



Adelaide doesn't admonish Louise for doing so. She isn't suggesting that women shouldn't get married, but she also wasn't going to allow another woman's marriage to prevent her from spreading the word about her beliefs. Adelaide so believes in her cause that she risks the scandal and criticism for traveling alone as woman. Further, she makes no attempt to hide that either.

Sexuality is explored with the information about Lydia Palmer. Adelaide believes Sarah to be Lydia Palmer, since Lydia disappeared after murdering her husband. The impetus for the murder of Lydia's husband is that he committed adultery. The male perspective suggested that the appropriate reaction to such a betrayal would be suicide or prostitution. This line of thinking demonstrates that women, if not in sexual service to a man, are useless and may as well be dead.

Like Sarah, Lydia has a distinct profile and this leads Adelaide to believe Sarah is Lydia. Obviously Sarah doesn't correct her, though it is possible that she may not be capable of doing so, or more likely may not want to. It is possible that Sarah feels a strong connection with those who offer assistance. She continues to return to Chin, and after Adelaide saves Sarah from Harold's advances, she stays with Adelaide. That doesn't mean that she won't move ahead. She runs off ahead of Adelaide during the scene on the footbridge. Perhaps this pattern of behavior is meant to lure people away from getting stuck in the situation at hand. Chin didn't want to leave his camp and Adelaide struggles on the footbridge, but Sarah somehow manages to lure them away.

While on the footbridge, Adelaide brandishes her gun and gets Purdy, Chin, and B.J. all to one side so that they can escape. In doing so, Adelaide acknowledges her fear and anxiety. While she has forced Purdy to give up his knife and gun, she remains fearful for her safety. This seems counter-intuitive, since she is the one who remains armed. This indicates how indoctrinated the subordination of women is. She understands that men have power by virtue of being men. Adelaide has power because she has a gun. The power is an extension of her, rather than actually her.

Ultimately, Adelaide cuts the footbridge. She doesn't consider that when the tide is at different levels that the creek may be passable without the bridge. She simply knows that she needs to sever the immediacy of the men getting to her. She's buying time. Yet the act of cutting the bridge is symbolic. It demonstrates her independence and it shows a clear divide between the women being surrounded by men and being on their own; this is true of both Adelaide and Sarah. The women lead the action and control their fate starting with the destruction of the footbridge.

Of course the men do get across the stream. Purdy knows the region well enough to understand that when the tide goes out, the water level will be low enough to cross. This is an example of the theme of nature.

While waiting for the tide to go out, the men return to the hotel. When B.J. and Chin arrive in Sarah's room, they discover women's clothing laid out on the bed. Some of the garments are items Chin has never seen before and can only guess their function. The



placement of the dress foreshadows Sarah's ultimate escape, and suggests that there is a genuine risk of Chin not catching up with her again.

In chapter eleven, Harold isn't looking well. He's pale from the stabbing, but the wound doesn't appear to be fatal. Curiously, Harold claims immortality. Harold also discusses the possibility that Sarah is actually a vampire. Harold is prone to fantastical beliefs and certainly is open to the idea of mythological creatures being real, as is evidenced by his belief in the mermaid. The vampire story he tells is of a woman vampire called Carmilla. The story of Carmilla predates Dracula by twenty-plus years and shows the woman with power. Harold may be suggesting that Sarah is a vampire because of what he considers her failure on stage. This may be how he is justifying to the other men to save face over the embarrassment.

In section vi, both themes of sexuality and race are present. The Mad House is a brothel that specializes in Indian women. It also informs the reader that at this time in the territory, Indian men are now dressing like the white men. It demonstrates how the Indians are being assimilated.

In chapters twelve and thirteen, Purdy, Chin, and B.J. make their way to find the women with the help of Sam and Old Patsy. The theme of nature can be seen in the weather wreaking havoc on the group as they make their way through the canal. Sam is reluctant to go because of high winds. He is motivated into going when he witnesses Harold stealing one of his canoes. Purdy suggests in chapter thirteen that they move out from the coast in an effort to speed up their journey. While this would likely be true, Sam resists because it is far more dangerous to do so.

While in the canoe, Purdy discusses women and their ability to take advantage of their situation and reinforces the theme of sexuality. Purdy believes that women can use their sexuality or their feminine wiles to get what they want out of man. He perceives this as power. It is possible that he views a woman's seduction as on par with a man's desire for women, yet he doesn't understand his own power in society. He further discusses how he has seen a woman ride with a horse between her legs. He doesn't consider the function or it or that it may be safer. Rather, he views it sexually.

The conversation turns to Blair and his status as a half-breed. Because of his mixed-race, Blair is able to achieve a higher standing in society. He recognizes that full-blooded Indians are not afforded the same opportunity. He doesn't comment on whether or not it is right or wrong. Rather he says it as a statement of fact. The theme of race continues with the discussion about whether or not Chin would have been charged with the murder of Jim Allen if he stayed at the hotel (and also the attempted murder of Harold). Purday says it's easier to blame an outsider for something bad than it is to accept that one of their own committed such an act. Chin is well aware of his position – or lack thereof – in society because of his race. This concept of an outsider being held responsible foreshadows what happens to Lydia following her trial.



Discussion Question 1

What are the implications of Chin's chopstick being used to stab Harold?

Discussion Question 2

Why is Adelaide afraid on the footbridge even though she's the one with gun?

Discussion Question 3

What does Purdy's comment about half-breeds achieving power reveal about the social relationships of the time?

Vocabulary

advocacy, decorously, derision, parable, alienists, phrenologists, astride, pernicious, sloop, bifurcation, tenpins, abdicate, inconspicuous, crockery, defiance, reverie, shanty, semaphore, clientele, clemency, putrescent, pestilential, susceptibility, pot latch, perfidy, talons, gunwale, feign, yew, malice, thwarts, scaffolds, asymmetrical, vivid, implicate, shirk, giddy, benign, untethered, telegraph, inducement



Section vii, chapter 14; section viii, chapter 15

Summary

Section vii, discusses the Mosquito Fleet steamboats and the frequent perils of the boats. One boat, the Eliza Anderson, carried pianos and whiskey. When the boat began to sink, the pianos were dumped overboard, but saved the whiskey.

Chapter fourteen, "Emmaline Recites Lear", introduces a steamer called the Pumpkin. Adelaide and Sarah, again referred to as Lydia in this chapter, sitting in the captain's cabin. They meet a young girl called Emmeline, who makes fun of Sarah for the noises she makes. Sarah wears a veil over her face. An attempt by Adelaide to help conceal her identity. Captain Wescott requests to speak to Adelaide, whom he knows as Mrs. Byrd, and comes to the cabin after Adelaide claims the hardship of leaving her companion. Captain Wescott informs Adelaide that they have picked up men from a capsized canoe. Since he is under the impression that Adelaide has some medical experience because she is caring for Sarah, he asks that she look in on the men. She agrees to see the men and finds B.J. and Chin. B.J. is better off than Chin. Adelaide goes to Chin and considers her impression of Chinese men and the manner with which the women are treated in the culture, and by extension, thinks about Arab men and their harems, and how women are more desirable to more sequestered and virginal than they are. She claims that there's nothing to be done for Chin, but suggested he be brought closer to the fire. She tells B.J. that Chin will be fine. Emmaline and her mother arrive; Emmeline wants to see the shipwrecked men. Emmeline quotes Lear when she sees the men, referencing men who were caught in a storm.

Section viii discusses Ann Aliza, a woman who lectured about Brigham Young's love life. Her lectures addressed sexuality within the framework of religion. She married a man who cheated on her and accused her of being frigid. She divorced him after her husband began frequenting prostitutes.

Chapter fifteen, "The Capture of Lydia Palmer", opens with Emmaline and Adelaide speaking. Emmeline tells her about how she and Mrs. Maynard, her mother, traveled from Boston to the territories to reconnect with her father. When they arrived, they learned that he had married another woman. Mrs. Maynard explains that she wasn't informed of the divorce and that other women accused her of losing her husband because she left him alone too long. Adelaide wonders why if the men marry others when they leave for other parts of the country, then why don't the women marry others as well.

Captain Wescott learns that another man has stowed away on the ship. Adelaide asks B.J. who else was on the canoe with them; B.J. tells her Sam, old Patsy, and Purdy. Captain Westcott says he knows Purdy and that the stowaway is not him. They



determine the stowaway is Harold. Upon realizing this, Adelaide returns to the captain's cabin and Sarah. Captain Wescott knocks on the door again to speak with Adelaide. The ship is conducting a search and the captain wants all passengers in the same area for safety. Adelaide insists they're safer in the cabin and then she hears her real name whispered on the other side of the door.

She hears Mrs. Maynard say that she was suspicious of the women all along. Captain Wescott tells her that Mrs. Maynard believes a man is staying in the cabin with her. Even with the veil, Mrs. Maynard says she can recognize a man. Sarah shows them her face, but Mrs. Maynard remains unconvinced. A crew member tells the captain that food and whiskey are missing from the galley. Captain Wescott tells them to search the stern after another crew member announces that Harold has been spotted. He apologizes to Adelaide and leaves them be. Adelaide then finds a newspaper in which there is an article about Lydia Palmer being captured six days earlier. Adelaide goes to the boiler room to ask B.J. about Sarah. He explains that Chin found her and that her name is Sarah Canary. Adelaide asks if they will take her home; B.J. agrees if Adelaide will tell him where. He also tells Adelaide to keep Sarah away from Harold.

Analysis

In chapter fourteen, Adelaide and Sarah have made it onto a steamer ship. Adelaide has disguised Sarah with a veil, not because of how Sarah looks, but rather because of who she looks like. Adelaide is convinced that Sarah is Lydia and she is determined to help. She has also given Captain Wescott a false name. She identified Sarah as herself and given herself the name of Mrs. Byrd as the traveling companion. Because Captain Wescott is under the impression that Adelaide has some level of medical training, he requests that she take a look at two stowaways. Adelaide agrees reluctantly and is surprised to find B.J. and Chin.

The theme of race is apparent by Adelaide's treatment of Chin. While Adelaide doesn't do anything to harm Chin, she resists doing anything to help, suggesting that he's too far gone to help. In doing so, she reveals her bias against a Chinese man. Because the narration explains quite plainly that Adelaide doesn't not approve of the way Chinese men treat women, Adelaide is unable to look at Chin as an individual, but rather as representative of his entire race. This may stem in part for the way in which Adelaide believes herself to representative of all women. While she can't and/or won't do anything for him, she does suggest moving him closer to the fire to warm up. Because of exposure in the canal, Chin is likely suffering from hypothermia, although this isn't directly addressed in the text of the novel. Adelaide's actions toward Chin demonstrate her humanity. She may not like it, but she is compelled to help, not solely as a woman, but rather as a human.

Section viii introduces the reader to Ann Aliza, a woman lectures on sexuality in much the same way that Adelaide does. She may be a real-life inspiration for the character Adelaide. This section supports the theme of sexuality, as Ann Aliza's lectures spoke frankly about sexuality; however, the lectures were put in the context of religion and how



sexuality and religion coexist. Her sexuality is ultimately called into question when her husband deems her frigid to justify his trips to brothels.

Chapter fifteen gives more information about Mrs. Maynard and Emmeline. The reader learns that Mrs. Maynard and her daughter traveled west to be with her husband. When they arrived, she was told that her husband had been granted a divorce and married another. This demonstrates the standing of women. Here Mrs. Maynard was divorced, but had never been told. She didn't have any say in the matter, as if her marriage wasn't her own. She and her daughter were simply disposed of. The women around Mrs. Maynard blamed her for it. There is no solidarity with these women. Instead of standing up for a woman who has been wronged, they turned on her and blamed and/or shamed the victim. This experience may account for the way in which Mrs. Maynard betrays Adelaide. She suggests to Captain Wescott that there was something suspicious about Adelaide and Sarah all along. Mrs. Maynard and Emmeline don't make an effort to understand the women – Emmeline went so far as to mock Sarah when she first heard her – instead they turn their back. Perhaps it's much like the Chinese workers who didn't stop working to help their fallen man. The workers were so concerned with what may happen with their job that they couldn't stop until they were assured otherwise. Similarly, Mrs. Maynard and Emmeline has experienced being ostracized and blames for something out their control. Perhaps they don't feel that they can justify risking further social outcast by coming the aid of someone already considered scandalous. Further, they may feel as though they can achieve some kind of elevated social standing by calling the other women out. This speaks to the theme of feminism.

Adelaide learns from a newspaper on the steamer that the real Lydia Palmer has been captured and is going to stand trial. Instead of abandoning Sarah, Adelaide seeks to better understand who she is. She goes to B.J. and he gives her what little information he has. In sticking with Sarah, Adelaide proves her dedication to the cause of women.

Discussion Question 1

Why does Adelaide conceal Sarah's identity on the steamer?

Discussion Question 2

What does Mrs. Maynard's comment about being suspicious of the women all along reveal about her character?

Discussion Question 3

What does Mrs. Maynard not being informed of her own divorce reveal about women in the novel's time period?



Vocabulary

calliope, incredulously, epaulets, ruse, acutely, indulgence, unctuous, gallantry, confer, kerchief, delirium, amputated, laudanum, obsequious, retentive, concubine, virulent, polygamous, par, eminence, avid, genteel, chaste, illicit, amorous, demure, pallid, misogynist, avaricious, pannier, preposterous, irrelevant, ipecac, cascara, approbation, respite, purloined, opined



Section ix, chapters 16-18; part x, chapter 19, part xi

Summary

Section ix discusses Chinatown in San Francisco and the transcontinental railroad's completion in 1869.

In chapter sixteen, "The Story of Caspar Hauser", Adelaide, B.J. and Chin decide to take Sarah to San Francisco, where Adelaide knows of a women's rescue mission. Adelaide and Chin discuss slavery and Adelaide talks about how races mixed until people could pass either way. Chin considers how Adelaide had something to say about everything and that this wasn't an attractive quality in a woman. They discuss why Harold is in pursuit of Sarah. Adelaide suggests revenge, avarice, and fear. Chin counters with hate. Adelaide brings up Caspar Hauser, a man who appeared mysteriously as a teenager, claiming that he had been kept in a closet without human contact. He was followed and killed. It was later discovered that Caspar was the heir to the Royal house of Baden and was hidden and killed because of it. They compare Caspar's story to Sarah's. B.J. comments on how expensive Sarah's clothes appeared to be. The ship docks and they disembark. Once on land, Sarah runs; Chin follows after her. A white man stops Chin and asks what he's going to do to the woman. A gun is fired. B.J. catches up to Chin and tells him that Adelaide fired the gun. Chin spots Harold snap a whip onto Adelaide's hand, knocking the gun out of her hand. Harold takes her away in the carriage and Chin can hear Adelaide calling for him. Sarah runs back and stands between Chin and B.J.

Chapter seventeen, "Afternoon in Woodward's Gardens" picks up with B.J. asking Chin what's to be done. Chin thinks Harold must think he has Sarah instead of Adelaide. They go to the Occidental Hotel. A woman approaches them and Chin tells B.J. to tell her that Adelaide Dixon will be arriving soon. The woman takes them to a private room. She offers them food and arranges for bread and coffee. A waiter brings Chin a folded paper that reads: trade. Inside is an address for Woodward's Gardens. They get directions and a carriage. They arrive at the gardens and find animals in cages. They encounter Harold and Chin asks about Adelaide. Harold tells them they're too late; Adelaide is inside of a cage with a Bengal tiger.

Chin tries to lure the tiger away from Adelaide; he also asks if anyone has gone to get the animal's keeper. Chin and Adelaide work together to get her free. She pulls on the tiger's tail and he rushes and snaps at Chin, shredding the sleeve of his shirt. Adelaide escapes to the other side of the bars and stabs into the cage and frees Chin's sleeve. The keeper wants to speak with Adelaide, but she's concerned about Sarah's whereabouts. They spot Harold with a knife and find Sarah's dress lying on the ground. Harold claims "she metamorphosed" and that she overpowered him and escaped. Harold vows to find her again. A policeman takes a statement from Adelaide. She



describes Sarah and tells him she's "undressed." The policeman asks about Adelaide being a suffragette. Adelaide knows the policeman won't be following up on the case. A reporter interviews Adelaide and Chin about what happened. On the street, Chin hears his name and turns to find Wong Woon, who takes Chin to his uncle. The men drink and Chin wakes up hungover. He reads the article in the *El Camino Real* and finds the story about Adelaide; Chin isn't mentioned at all.

In chapter eighteen, "The Story of T'Ung Hsien Nu", Adelaide hires a Pinkerton detective to find Sarah. Chin's search for her turned up nothing. In response to the newspaper article, people sent letters to Adelaide about possible sightings. Chin thinks Sarah is gone for good. Adelaide is spending her time at the Lydia Palmer trial, after which she plans to go to New York. B.J. offers to marry her if she wants to stay on the west coast, but she politely declines. Lydia Palmer is acquitted and comes to see Adelaide at the hotel, but lots of men are displeased with the verdict.

B.J. goes and tells Chin what is happening at the hotel and that she told him to get the police, but they refused to go because it was too dangerous. Chin's uncle tells him that if he goes, they will kill him. The men are upset about the verdict, claiming that a man would have been hanged in a similar situation. The mob approaches the hotel and Adelaide tries to calm them, explaining that it was their judge and jury, and that she also has a gun. B.J. spots Sarah, but comments that she's much bigger. The men move toward her, mistaking her for Lydia. Chin yells for Adelaide to get down; a gun is fired. A second shot goes off and B.J. falls to the ground. Chin hears a man says it was an accident and that he only wanted to frighten the woman and shoot the Chinaman. B.J. dies and Adelaide and Lydia escape; Sarah disappears again. At the police station, Chin sees Harold and asks if he killed B.J.; Harold says no and that he's a changed man. He asks if Harold found Sarah; Harold says no and asks him the same. Harold offers Chin Sarah's dress; he claims that it sheds bullets and make people immortal. Chin declines and doesn't believe Harold's claim that he's immortal. Harold quotes Coleridge and Chin decides he must go home.

Section x references the Taiping Rebellion in 1864 and the fall of dynasties in China.

Chapter nineteen, "Chin's Theories on Fate and Chance" picks up in 1875 with Chin taking civil service exams in China. He thinks of Adelaide, as he did daily. The reader is told that he will marry a woman whom he will treat well, and his daughters will not have their feet bound, because of what he learned from Adelaide. He writes his exam and discusses destiny and how the stories people hear are the stories of themselves. Section xi jumps to 1987 and discusses the Jim Bakker sex scandal, dwarf tossing and bowling in Australia, a genetically engineered mouse, and Tiananmen Square in 1989. It concludes with an excerpt from a speech by Reagan about the Bureau of Indian Affairs, and references to a Chinese wild man and a flea circus.



Analysis

Section ix addresses the theme of race. It gives background information on the completion of the Transcontinental Railroad as well as the development of Chinatown in San Francisco. This leads the reader to San Francisco where B.J., Chin, Sarah, and Adelaide have all journeyed. The aim is to get Sarah the help she needs in finding her identity and family. Chin has complicated feelings about Adelaide. He is culturally conditioned to think that a woman with strong opinions and the willingness to voice them is unattractive, yet he is compelled by her. It may be that Chin considers what she says valid and logical. Further, he has watched her selflessly help another woman. The theme of race is addressed in their conversation when Adelaide discusses the Civil War and how slave owners and slaves mixed and that some mixed-race people could pass either way. They also discuss why Harold continues to pursue Sarah. Chin suggests that Harold may hate Sarah, yet Adelaide's claims of avarice, fear, and revenge may seem more likely. Harold's true motives aren't specifically revealed and are left to the interpretation of the reader.

Harold does catch up with them and ends up kidnapping Adelaide. It's possible that he has mistaken Adelaide for Sarah, but it's just as possible that he would want revenge on Adelaide given that she stabbed him. While Sarah has, once again, bolted ahead of the group, she quickly returns to B.J. and Chin after Adelaide is abducted. She may do this out of loyalty or fear. She may sense the protection – not necessarily of men, but of a group – of being with them, or it may be how she decides to communicate her willingness to help the woman who blindly helped her.

In chapter seventeen, B.J., Chin, and Sarah are at the Occidental Hotel. They speak to a woman on the wait staff to help them. She scurries them off into another room for privacy. This appears to be a network of support for women, or perhaps others. While they wait, a note is delivered, suggesting a trade. The group understands that they must confront Harold to get Adelaide back, but they aren't sure how to avoid the obvious cost of the trade.

The action moves to Woodward's Gardens, a type of zoo. When the group finally sees Adelaide, she is in one of the cages. Her life is in danger because of the tiger, but seeing her in the cage puts her on par with Sarah. Adelaide, in all of her outspoken feminism, is locked up and on display as a wild woman. This also references the theme of nature and how man navigates the persistent threats of nature. In this case, Adelaide must figure a way to get out of the cage and away from the tiger. To do so, she needs Chin's help. They both understand this without it being discussed. It is reflexive for Chin to help Adelaide. They work together as a team and Adelaide is successfully freed from the threat of the tiger. This action symbolizes how best to achieve equality between the sexes: for feminism to work, men need to be feminists as well. Working together as equals assures the survival of both.

While this is happening, Sarah allegedly metamorphosed and disappeared. Because this is Harold's account, it seems suspect. Yet, Sarah's dress remains, split from top to



bottom. It calls into question Harold's knife, but there isn't a body or blood. Sarah has vanished. Who or what Sarah ultimately was is left to the interpretation of the reader. Was she magical? A ghost woman as Chin suggested? A hallucination? A woman returning to the wild? It's unclear and up for debate.

Sarah's disappearance does not conclude the novel. The story continues with Adelaide attending Lydia Palmer's trial and supporting her. Adelaide continues to speak with Chin and B.J., but has decided to go back east following the conclusion of Lydia's trial. When Lydia is acquitted, she returns to the hotel with Adelaide. If it's a celebration, it's a modest one and short lived. The men are angered by the verdict and want revenge or justice or however they want to frame it. Adelaide understands that their lives are in jeopardy, but the police refuse to help. Even Adelaide's pleas to common sense go unheard. The crowd isn't interested in accepting the all-male judge and jury's decision. Adelaide, unlike when she brandished her gun on the footbridge, fires a gun into the air. This shows her taking control and owning her power as woman in the face the danger. Further chaos ensues and a gun is fired and strikes and kills B.J.

Chin feels guilty about B.J.'s death, knowing that the bullet was intended for him. Chin was expendable because he was of a different race, and considered an outsider. Similarly, the violence could have been avoided if Lydia had been convicted, because the men could have understood her conviction as penalizing an outsider.

Before he is shot, B.J. thinks he sees Sarah, although she looks different, larger. He loses sight of her and it is suggested that Harold dressed as Sarah to distract the violence. It is enough of a distraction for Lydia and Adelaide to escape the violence, but B.J. is sacrificed.

It is possible that because of his status as an outsider that Chin decides to return to China. He indicates that he will return to the United States, but it doesn't seem likely. He returns home to take government exams and assumes his place in a society that is comfortable to him. While he is an outsider in the United States, he is now somewhat of an outsider in China. His views have changed. The reader learns that he will treat his wife with more respect and that his daughters' won't have their feet bound. The influence of Adelaide on him is evident. In this way, Chin becomes a feminist.

The novel's action concludes with Chin in China. The final section, however, moves the timeline to modern times – the late 1980s, effectively to the present given that the novel was first published in 1991.

Discussion Question 1

Why does Harold think that Sarah's dress offers immortality?

Discussion Question 2

Why do the police refuse to come to the hotel for Adelaide and Lydia after the verdict?



Discussion Question 3

Why does Chin decide to return to China?

Vocabulary

disseminated, compatriots, debarkation, subjugated, diorama, orifice, stratagem, benevolence, ideogram, docile, pallor, gaslight, rotary, conservatory, polytechnic, larval, chrysalis, hermaphrodite, irresolutely, corona, protuberance, subordinated, celibacy, acquittal, incuriously, impunity, peril, regime, herpetologist



Characters

Chin Ah Kin

Chin Ah Kin is a Chinese immigrant working for the railroad. His uncle is also in the territory. After Sarah appears to Chin, his uncle is the one who tells him to take her away. Chin is a man who seems earnest and honest. He wants to do the right thing, and for Chin, right equates ethical. He doesn't want to abandon Sarah, even though she annoys him. Being compelled to do what is right is something that drives him through the duration of the novel.

When he first meets Sarah, he mistakes her for a ghost woman or an immortal. While Sarah's origins and destination remain a mystery, Chin considers her human. When they end up in the asylum after Chin is knocked out by Sarah, he has the option of leaving her there, but doesn't. He escapes with her and B.J. He doesn't feel as strong of a responsibility for B.J. at first; his priority is Sarah. As the two men spend time together, however, this begins to change.

In part, the connection between B.J. and Chin is based on how much easier it is for Chin to navigate in social circles with the help of a white man. B.J. relies on Chin in a different manner, but Chin is keenly aware of the limitations of his race in the given environment.

While he also acknowledges very traditional Chinese views of women, he is able to accept some of the teachings of Adelaide Dixon. Adelaide may not see it outright, but her influence is evident in the reveal of Chin's relationship with his future wife and daughters.

Sarah Canary

Sarah Canary is an enigmatic character. She is never fully explained or justified. She doesn't speak, but will make shrieking noises, screams, mumbles, and sometimes sings. She doesn't appear to be aware of her surroundings from a social standpoint, though occasionally she will relent and compromise. She is at the mercy of the men around her, until she meets Adelaide. While no direct harm comes to her, she is in a state of possible victimhood throughout.

It is unclear as to why Sarah first reveals herself to Chin, but she does come to trust him. She is wild and unencumbered by societal norms. She is, by Chin's observation, one of the ugliest women he's ever seen. She has short hair, scars on her face, and a large nose. She urinates in front of Chin and B.J. and eats with her hands. She is also unafraid to defend herself; she attacks Chin after he strikes her and fights back when Harold makes his advances.



Sarah disappears as mysteriously as she appeared. In Woodward's Gardens, she disappears from her dress and runs off. Harold is the only one to bear witness to this event. He claims that she transformed and that her dress offers others immortality. Harold also claims himself as an immortal, so his word isn't something to be taken at face value. Sarah is a powerful woman whose mysteries may in fact indicate that she is a symbol of the changing perceptions and values of women in this time period, and by extension to present times as well.

B.J.

B.J. is one of the patients at the Steilacoom Asylum. He has achieved some level of trust or relationship with Dr. Carr, as the two men appear close when introduced. B.J. acts as a type of apprentice to Dr. Carr, but has a warped view of reality. Ada, another patient, is nice to B.J. and he interprets this as Ada being in love with him.

He is prone to hallucinations, at one point thinking that a blanket and a knife are speaking to him. When others tell stories, he quickly relates them to stories he's heard. Often fairy tales, indicating the similarity in oral storytelling traditions.

He relies on Chin to tell him what to say to people as they make their way. He is aware enough of his mental illness that he doesn't trust himself. Chin and B.J. need each other to aptly navigate society. B.J. is with Chin when he is shot and killed; the bullet having been meant for Chin.

Adelaide Dixon

Adelaide Dixon is feminist lecturer. She speaks freely and readily about female sexual agency, advocating for both multiple partners and sexual pleasure. She is aware of how her lectures shock men, and sometimes women, but she is willing to assume that risk.

She is traveling alone after her lecture partner got married. A strong advocate for women, she is ready, willing, and able to help. She mistakes Sarah for Lydia Palmer. When she learns that Sarah is not who she thinks she is, she doesn't abandon Sarah; instead she helps try and get her to a women's rescue mission. Eventually, Sarah meets the real Lydia Palmer, attends her murder trial, and is with her the night of her acquittal.

Adelaide is a woman who risks her life to save others, as she demonstrates with Sarah and Lydia. While she is a strong woman, she also feels she is somewhat of a fraud. She advocates for sexual liberation, but is not overly sexual herself.

Tom

Tom is the Indian that Chin is ordered to kill. He is resigned to his impending death and doesn't appear to harbor ill-will toward Chin. He watches the moon his final night, which leads to Chin watching the moon throughout the remainder of the novel.



Old Patsy

Old Patsy is Sam Clams' wife. She steers the canoe and helps bail water when needed.

Sam Clams

Sam Clams is the Indian Purdy takes Chin and B.J. to see about renting a canoe. He resists renting the canoe to the men, instead offering to sell it to them. He doesn't want to risk the water in bad weather, but changes his mind when he spots Harold stealing one of his other canoes.

Will Purdy

Will Purdy is the postmaster in Seabeck. He is tall and thin with curly dark hair and works to prevent people from sneaking out of the hotel without paying. He helps Chin and B.J. go after Adelaide and Sarah. He introduces them to Sam Clams and is also on the canoe when it capsizes.

Dr. Carr

Dr. Carr is the doctor at the Steilacoom Asylum. His thoughts are reminiscent of Freud's theories. He uses B.J. as his assistant. He diagnoses Sarah as criminally insane based on her facial features.

Harold

Harold travels around managing people or things that one would find in a freak show. He leaves the mermaid with Burke in exchange for Sarah. He renames her the Alaskan Wild Woman. After he tries to assault Sarah, he is stabbed by Adelaide, whom he later kidnaps in an effort to get Sarah back. He also claims to be immortal.



Symbols and Symbolism

Scars

When Sarah is introduced, she is described as having scars along the side of her face that look like bird tracks. These scars symbolize her migratory nature. She moves from place to place with relative ease. It also foreshadows her disappearance at the end of the novel as birds migrate elsewhere.

Fog

Fog develops when Chin and Sarah make their way from the camp to Steilacoom. The fog creeps in and obscures Sarah from Chin while he is worried about the noise she makes and the prospect of Indians locating them. The fog is at its thickest when Chin falls and loses consciousness when he hits his head on the gravestone. The fog symbolizes the confusion of the situation and foreshadows that the mystery of Sarah will not be resolved.

Lake Whe-atchee

Lake Whe-atchee is a lake that Tom tells Chin about the night before his execution. The word “whe-atchee” translates to underhanded or deceitful. It is named as such because of the ever-changing shoreline. It symbolizes not only the complications surrounding Tom’s execution, but also foreshadows the way deceit is used through the novel: Burke lying about the creation of the mermaid, Adelaide disguising Sarah, and Harold kidnapping Adelaide in order to get to Sarah.

Moon

The moon is a symbol of femininity. Its importance is introduced with Tom, which carries over to Chin. By emphasizing the moon’s importance, it highlights Chin’s desire to help the women. The moon is a traditionally feminine symbol as its cycles are reminiscent of a woman’s cycle.

Sarah's Dress

The dress is symbolic of Sarah’s status. While B.J. indicates that the dress is made well and may indicate that she comes from a position of wealth, it is later used as a symbol of immortality. Harold suggests that the dress shields bullets. Perhaps this indicates that a person of a higher class is immune to some of the difficulties and dangers of the lower classes. Sarah sheds the dress in her final disappearance; it is referenced as being like



a cocoon. This may symbolize that how a person's ability to adapt to social changes is better apt to survive.

The Chopstick

Harold is stabbed with one of Chin's chopstick. When it happens, it is left unclear as to who stabbed him, but regardless of who stabbed him, the chopstick holds an implication that Chin is the responsible party; this symbolizes the jeopardy of minorities of the time. Further, the chopstick is symbolic of a phallus. Adelaide stabs Harold, effectively penetrating him, while he attempts to rape Sarah. It symbolizes the struggle and power of women at the time.

The Footbridge

The footbridge is symbolic of the timeframe in which the novel is set. Social changes are happening, in particular how women are declaring their independence and becoming agents for themselves. When Adelaide cuts the footbridge, it symbolizes a mark in time from which there is no going back. The women declare their independence from the men when the bridge falls.

Wild Woman

The concept of a wild woman is symbolic of the early stages of the feminist movement. Men create the myth of the wild woman to account for behaviors and social cues that men aren't comfortable with. If the woman is wild, it is likely something that happens rarely and is treated as a spectacle, like Harold putting Sarah on display, or novelty to entertain, such as when the men in the saloon taunt Adelaide after her lecture.

Mermaid

The mermaid is symbolic of man creating something. Much as the men in the novel seek to contain women in the way they best think they should behave, the mermaid is created to give evidence to a myth. Burke's confession, and subsequent guilt, over creating the mermaid demonstrates the baby steps in accepting women for themselves, rather than a created ideal.

The Gun

The gun that Adelaide carries is symbolic of power. While Adelaide is on the footbridge, she holds Purdy, and later Chin and B.J. at gunpoint, yet she considers how she remains afraid, even though she is the one with gun. This demonstrates the power that men are naturally afforded. Adelaide's power can easily be overridden if she loses possession of the gun.



Settings

Washington Territories

Almost the entirety of the novel transpires in the Washington Territories in 1873. The woods are thick with trees. There are creeks and river beds leading to the ocean. It is near what is present-day Seattle. It is where Chin first encounters Sarah and where Chin, B.J., and Purdy go to rent a canoe from Sam.

Steilacoom Asylum

The asylum is where Sarah gets her name. It is an insane asylum where Dr. Carr and B.J., a patient, discuss other patients and Freudian-like analysis. After Sarah is attacked by a warden, she flees the asylum, followed by Chin and B.J. It is a cold, dank facility.

Bay View Hotel

The Bay View Hotel is where Harold and Sarah are staying at the same time as Adelaide. The two women meet after Adelaide interrupts Harold's assault on Sarah. The hotel has a saloon on the first floor and a tree outside the window of a room upstairs, through which Adelaide and Sarah escape.

Burke's Cabin

Burke's Cabin has wood walls and a dirt floor. It is where Burke introduces Chin, B.J., and Sarah to Harold. It is also where Harold is keeping the mermaid.

Pumpkin

Pumpkin is the nickname for a steamboat called Lotta White. It is called Pumpkin because of its size and speed. It is where Adelaide and Sarah encounter Captain Wescott and stay in his quarters. It is also the steamer that picks up Chin and B.J. after they are stranded following the canoe capsizing.

Woodward's Gardens

Woodward's Gardens is in San Francisco. It is a park that is like a zoo. There are large cages and exotic animals. Harold puts Adelaide in the Bengal tiger enclosure before he meets with Chin and B.J. to exchange Adelaide for Sarah. It is also where Sarah disappears and leaves her dress behind.



Themes and Motifs

Nature

The theme of nature can be traced throughout the novel. The primary setting is the Washington Territories. Given that the territory is largely unsettled, it is rich with trees, creeks, canals, and the wild of the forests.

When Tom, the Indian about to be put to death, talks with Chin, he watches the moon from his cell window. He is captivated by it, coming to terms with the fact that this is the last time he will be seeing the moon. He hears birds and an owl comes to visit. During his conversation with Chin, he seems to pass on a fascination with the moon. Chin reflects throughout the novel about seeing the moon when Tom cannot, or how on a stormy night, he won't be able to see the moon. Tom also tells of Lake Whe-at-chie, which possesses a shoreline that changes.

When Chin, B.J., and Sarah encounter Burke in the forest, he leads them back to his cabin, where they are introduced to Harold. Though it is not immediately revealed, B.J. discovers the embalmed corpse of what is said to be a mermaid. Burke later confesses that he created the mermaid from a monkey and a salmon. He refers to it as an abomination; it is not of the natural world. Harold takes the mermaid on tour to display; he's interested in freaks of nature. This draws him to Sarah. He leaves the mermaid behind and takes Sarah on his tour, but she reveals herself to be a disappointment on the stage.

Another example of how nature is used in the novel is in how it examines human nature. Dr. Carr and Burke both discuss the evolutionary disadvantage of women; they both regard women as lesser evolved than a man. Further, Sarah is considered a wild woman, with some speculation by the men that she was raised in the wild. Sarah's nature differs from the societal norms of most women of the time. Likewise, Adelaide differs as well. She is outspoken, opinionated, and speaks of sexual liberation. The men view this as going against the true nature of women.

Race

Race is another theme in Sarah Canary. During the time period of the novel, the Chinese immigrants are working on the railroads, following the end of the gold rush. Chin is extremely aware of his status as a Chinese man in the territories. He is fearful of the Indians because he has heard stories about the Indians killing the Chinese.

One of these stories examines how the Indians didn't waste time getting to know and understand the Chinese after what happened when the white man arrived in the New World. Because of the savagery committed against the Native Americans, the Indians decided to be aggressive toward any immigrants. When Chin and Tom speak, they



debate the process of foot binding. Tom doesn't approve, which Chin doesn't see anything wrong with it, although this is something he will later change his mind about.

Harold tells a story of how the Chinese workers left a wounded man because they didn't want to be docked wages. He considers the Chinese to be selfish, as opposed to understanding possibilities of a work ethic and/or fear of losing employment because someone moved away from completing their duties. Harold exhibits what readers may understand as white male privilege in current vernacular.

Adelaide has very progressive, strong feminist ideas for the time period. She also has strong opinions about how men in different cultures treat their women. She is also outraged over the oppressive ways in which Arab men treat their woman by hiding them away and keeping multiple wives. At one point, the novel directly addresses that she does not like Chinese men because of the way in which they treat women.

The novel takes place post-Civil War, during the Reconstruction of the South. While the racial dynamics of blacks and whites of the time are sparingly referenced, it is important to note this time period in American history. While Sarah Canary may not outwardly deal with the Reconstruction, it does acknowledge that the time period shadows the race relations of the time.

Language

Language is another theme that can be traced throughout the novel. At the outset, the reader understands that while Sarah is a verbal character, she does not speak in any particular language. Chin, whose first language is Chinese, is also familiar with German, and speaks English quite well. He is learned enough to recognize multiple languages, but whatever Sarah is speaking is completely foreign to him. He does, however, recognize that while he may not understand what she's saying, he does sense that she makes sense.

Another way that language is used is how the medical vernacular of the time is expanding. Dr. Carr and B.J. speak of animal magnetism, lunacy, hysteria, and ink blots. They even conduct conversations about penis envy and patients projecting emotions on doctors.

Because of how radical her ideas are, it is almost as though Adelaide speaks another language when she discusses ideas of femininity, sexuality, and the roles of women in society. Some of her ideas aren't even fully comprehended by other women. Adelaide may advocate for all women, understanding that a crime against one woman is a crime against all, the feeling isn't totally reciprocated. This is evidenced by Mrs. Maynard turning on Adelaide and Sarah on the steamer.

Language is also demonstrated with how B.J. and Chin rely on each other to communicate. Chin understands that his racial identity creates a disadvantage in dealing directly with people. Similarly, B.J. doesn't quite know how to connect with others, yet he is of the dominant race. Chin often tells B.J. what to say (and what to do



as well) in order for them to make their way through the story. B.J. relies on Chin to know what to say and Chin relies on B.J. to say so that it may be heard.

Sexuality

The theme of sexuality can be traced throughout the novel. Adelaide is at the forefront of the feminist movement. Some of her opinions may even be called into question today and ideas about female sexuality continue to be explored. She advocates for women to take multiple sexual partners and to enjoy sex.

These ideas are scoffed at in the saloon. Men suggest that if a woman just lies, what expectation for enjoyment should there be? Another man offers that if he's paying for sex, he shouldn't have to be concerned with whether or not the woman is enjoying herself.

If Adelaide is advocating for multiple partners, she is clearly advocating for sex outside of marriage. She reflects on how Arab men treat their women and the fact that they can have multiple wives. Sheltered and inexperienced seems to be what the men desire.

When Chin first takes Sarah back to the camp, his uncle tells him that she can't stay. In part this is because of racial issues, but he also indicates that if she stayed too long, one of the men would have to marry her. It demonstrates how a woman must belong to man in order to find a proper place in society.

At the hotel, Sarah is in her room after Harold has put her on display as the Wild Woman of Alaska. The performance does not go well and Harold ends up making sexual advances toward Sarah. He justifies his actions by claiming that Sarah owes him, not merely for ruining the show, but also because of the room in board. He feels that Sarah belongs to him and that because of this he can use her sexually. While Sarah does fight back, it's not until Adelaide intercedes and stabs him that the attack is finished.

Feminism

At the heart of Sarah Canary is the dominant theme of feminism. The two main female characters, Adelaide and Sarah, are strong women. They are independent and take action for themselves. Sarah encounters Chin alone and Adelaide is traveling alone as well.

Both women are not outwardly intimidated by men. While the reader comes to understand that Adelaide may not practice what she preaches, preferring not to engage in multiple sexual partners and that she while she may be in possession of a gun, she is fearful of her safety, outwardly, Adelaide is revolutionary. She speaks freely of sex and brandishes the gun when necessary. She even goes so far as to stab a man to help another woman.



Sarah doesn't exhibit fear when she encounters Chin. She follows his lead when eating at the camp. When Chin offers her his chopsticks and eats with his hands, Sarah mimics his actions by discarding the chopsticks and using her hands as well. This may be an action she is well-acquainted with, but because the reader lacks access to her life before meeting Chin, it's difficult to ascertain.

Sarah is also introduced as being one of the ugliest women in the world. Because this is one of the first bits of information the reader learns about Sarah, the stage is set that Sarah works against the norm. She is not adhering to traditional beauty standards. She may very well not be attractive, but she also isn't doing anything to conform to expectations.

Lydia Palmer is another strong female character. While the character is not developed throughout the novel, it is understood that she was a betrayed woman who took action. She killed her husband, escaped, was captured, and stood trial. Ultimately she was acquitted.



Styles

Point of View

Sarah Canary is told from the perspective of a third person, omniscient narrator. The narration is consistent and appears to be a reliable narrator.

While Sarah is the title character of the novel, her internal monologue or thoughts are not offered. The reader sees her actions through the lens of other characters. The narrator simply details what she is doing without additional commentary. No backstory is given on her character either, which differs from many other characters, including minor ones. Ultimately, the reader knows more about Tom in his brief scene in the jail that is explained about Sarah. The point of this is to allow the reader to view Sarah in much the same way as the other characters.

The focus of the novel is linear and rarely deviates from the primary focus of the novel. It opens with Sarah appearing to Chin, but does not end when Sarah disappears. Rather, the opening paragraphs introduce Chin and the closing paragraphs of the main story close with Chin as well.

This point of view allows for the reader, who by nature of being a contemporary person, views the world through an outsider's perspective. While the main characters are outsiders in their own right, Chin is designed as the character that is the biggest outsider. Witnessing Chin's perspective as bookends for the novel allows the reader to relate to the story as an outsider as well.

Language and Meaning

The language used in Sarah Canary is straightforward. When medical information is given, the vocabulary trends to more difficult, but otherwise, the vocabulary is easily read and understood.

While the vocabulary is accessible, at times the meaning is lost and borders on confusion. For example, while the group is in the canoe and about to capsize, it becomes more challenging for the reader to follow along with who says what or what happens to whom. A quick reread is likely to clarify, but the confusion may be intentional on the author's part, given the chaos that would undoubtedly surround such an event in real life.

There isn't a tremendous amount of dialogue in the novel. When there is dialogue it offers a glimpse to how the characters relate to one another, and often gives exposition. The dialogue is natural and straight forward. It is functional, rather than relying on dialogue to develop the characters.



Throughout the novel, it is made clear that Sarah makes a tremendous amount of noise. She shrieks, screams, moans, mumbles, and sings. There is little to no effort to convey what these sounds may be like. In a rare occurrence, there may be a phonetic reference to what is being said, but the reader is left with understanding that while Sarah is verbal, she isn't trying to communicate with the others. She doesn't seem to be interested in being understood; she is more interested in being accepted as she is.

Structure

The structure of *Sarah Canary* is a linear story interrupted by short sections that provide historical context. It opens with a quote from "Lumen" by Camille Flammarion in 1873, the time period in which the book takes place.

There are a total of nineteen chapters and eleven sections. The sections are not titles and are represented by a Roman numeral. The chapters are identified by chapter number and a title.

Each of the eleven sections is short, often a page or two. Section I includes chapters one and two; section ii includes chapters three and four; section iii includes chapters five and six; section iv includes chapters seven and eight; section v includes chapters nine, ten, and eleven; section vi includes chapters twelve and thirteen; section vii includes chapter fourteen only; section viii includes chapter fifteen only; section ix includes chapters sixteen, seventeen, and eighteen; section x includes chapter nineteen only; section xi concludes the novel and does not include any chapters.

The chapters all begin with quotes from Emily Dickinson; Dickinson's work is not referenced in the text, nor is she quoted within the chapters. Tennyson and Coleridge are the poets quoted within the chapter text. These two men are quoted directly by male characters. The female poet is used outside of the chapter text, reinforcing the idea of women as outsiders.



Quotes

People speaking a foreign tongue often appear more logical and intelligent than those who can be actually understood.”

-- Narrator (chapter 1 paragraph 2)

Importance: This quote appears early in the novel and prepares the reader for the breakdowns in communication throughout, particularly between genders and races. It invites the reader to step back and trust in what might not make sense at first.

I will look at the moon for you. Every night I will do that.”

-- Chin (chapter 2 paragraph 82)

Importance: Chin tells Tom that he will look to the moon for him the night before Tom's death. It demonstrates the weight of what Chin is being forced to do by killing Tom and allows Tom to know that both the man and the deed will not be forgotten.

Sanity is a delicate concept, lunacy only slight less so.”

-- Narrator (ii paragraph 1)

Importance: This quote shows the fine line between what is considered sane or insane. It can be subjective and change over time.

Are women part of the man God created nature for or are they part of the nature God created for man?”

-- B.J. (chapter 6 paragraph 86)

Importance: This quote questions women's roles in society. As the novel seeks to understand the early days of the feminist movement, B.J. asks the question honestly, but it is a question asked by someone who is considered insane.

Adelaide had scandalized Philadelphia and Boston and St. Louis less with her belief that women and men should enjoy a variety of sexual partners than with the underlying suggestion that women should, in fact, be enjoying sex at all.”

-- Narrator (chapter 7 paragraph 2)

Importance: The quote illustrates the reputation Adelaide has made for herself. While Adelaide isn't an overtly sexual woman, her insistence on speaking directly for female sexual agency makes her scandalous.

Adelaide had given a lecture to lumbermen on the finer points of female sexuality, prevented a forcible seduction, and disarmed a murderess. It was not a bad night's work, after all.”

-- Narrator (chapter 9 paragraph 12)



Importance: This quote is an example of the humor in the novel. While the quote lists Adelaide's accomplishments, she indulges in being a bit of prideful for taking action.

The ghost was Tom or it was Sarah Canary, seducing him with freedom, which was a thing so much closer to death than Chin had ever realized."

-- Narrator (chapter 10 paragraph 43)

Importance: Chin is a man of responsibility. This quote demonstrates how he is haunted by the people he is irrevocably connected to. He is responsible for taking Tom's life, just as he feels responsible for saving Sarah's life.

The white man will never be alone. Let him be just and deal kindly with my people, for the dead are not powerless. Dead, did I say? There is no death, only a change of worlds."

-- Chief Seattle (vi paragraph 11)

Importance: This quote is taken from one of the sections in which background information is given on both the time and place of the novel. The quote illustrates the weight of what colonialism has done to native peoples.

Out here in the west, women are like precious jewels. Out here in the west, a woman, any woman, is a queen."

-- Purdy (chapter 13 paragraph 14)

Importance: This quote demonstrates how Purdy's views of women are subjugated. While he may hold women in high regard, he still views them as subordinate to men by referring to them as a queen.

These were the women men really desired: imprisoned, untouched, and half-alive."

-- Narrator (chapter 14 paragraph 42)

Importance: The narrator discusses women of other cultures. Specifically, this quote references how Arab men view woman, but the quote also speaks broadly to all women as a subjugated class.

She had something to say about everything. This was not an attractive female quality, probably not even in the white culture."

-- Narrator (chapter 16 paragraph 15)

Importance: This quote reveals Chin's feelings of Adelaide. While he may be resistant to find Adelaide's qualities attractive, she greatly influences how Chin will treat women in the future, notably his wife and daughters.

Was Harold right that Sarah Canary was a killer? Had Sarah Canary killed B.J.? Or had she saved Chin? Or had she never been there at all?"

-- Narrator (chapter 18 paragraph 77)

Importance: Chin is confused about the events that transpired following the Lydia Palmer verdict, but the confusion may go back further. Were it not for Sarah, B.J. wouldn't have escaped the asylum and been in the street that night in the first place.