

# **The Second Coming Study Guide**

## **The Second Coming by Walker Percy**

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# Plot Summary

Will Barrett is depressed and contemplates suicide. He is convinced that life is meaningless and absurd, even as others routinely ask him for philanthropic donations from his vast personal estate. Although his golf game is excellent, he suffers from epilepsy and often has strange fugues and irrational ideas. Meanwhile, Allison Huger escapes from an asylum and makes her way to Will's area where she takes possession of a newly inherited greenhouse and large estate. As Allison tries to recover her memories and build a life, Will decides to commit suicide in a novel way - he will demand that God manifest His existence to save his life. A toothache interrupts Will's quest and, in failing health, he staggers into Allison's greenhouse. Over the next several weeks Allison takes care of Will while he falls in love with her. The two characters then decide to overcome their deficiencies by focusing on external events. As Will abandons his notion of suicide, Allison looks forward to a future full of love and commitment.

Will Barrett is exceptionally affluent and intelligent but he is lonely and severely depressed. He additionally suffers from epilepsy caused by a chemical imbalance that can be treated, albeit only with constant monitoring. Will's mental condition deteriorates through the early portions of the novel until he concludes that the only rational thing to do is to shoot himself. Meanwhile Leslie, Will's daughter, plans her marriage and worries about her father's apparent incompetence. Unknown to Will, Leslie begins to position herself as the guardian of his estate and plans to have him committed to a convalescent home that his fortune established and maintains.

Meanwhile, Allison Huger regains consciousness after a session of electroconvulsive therapy. She is an involuntary patient at Valleyhead Sanatorium and believes that the memory loss caused by the electroconvulsive therapy is more harmful than helpful. Over the course of several weeks, Allison plans an escape. Knowing that her plans will be forgotten she records them in a hidden notebook - the minute details are instructions to herself. One day she eavesdrops on a conversation between her parents and her doctor and learns that she has inherited a large estate from an eccentric woman who was a lifetime companion of Allison's aunt. She also learns that Allison's parents plan to have her declared mentally incompetent so they can dispose of the estate as they see fit. Several hours later Allison successfully executes her escape plan and travels to her newly inherited estate. She finds it decrepit and abandoned, but takes possession of an old greenhouse that she cleans and begins to repair.

As Will's mental condition continues to deteriorate, he determines to make his suicide count for something - his death will have a purpose. Will decides that he will hide inside of a local cave and starve to death; he will only leave the cave if God manifests His existence. Thus, Will believes, he will either prove or disprove the existence of God. Will's bizarre and patently ridiculous experiment is interrupted after several days by a toothache. Suffering from pain and nausea, he crawls from the cave and staggers into Allison's greenhouse where he collapses. Over the next several weeks, Allison nurses Will back to health and the two characters fall in love. Will admires Allison's ability and values her assistance, while Allison feels Will's unconditional acceptance completes her.



Will then goes back to town where he learns that his daughter has moved him into the convalescent home. He enters the home and spends several days, apparently drugged, watching television and sinking into a nearly mindless routine. Kitty, an old girlfriend, then accosts him. Kitty has recently discovered what has been happening between Will and her daughter, Allison. This encounter apparently awakens Will and he leaves the convalescent home, returns to Allison, and proposes marriage and a future of business and happy living. Allison quickly agrees and the two characters then have joyful sex, extended discussions, and look forward to a successful relationship. The novel concludes with Will attempting to secure the marriage services of an old priest.



# Part 1, Chapter 1

## Part 1, Chapter 1 Summary

Section 1 - Will Barrett, roughly 48 years old, is depressed. While playing golf, a game at which he normally excels, he falls down for no apparent reason. He begins to have episodes of flashbacks where he appears to enter a trance for several seconds at a time. He finds his own life and the lives of others to be farcical and he concludes that he will shoot himself. His regular golf partner, Dr. Vance Battle, is concerned that, perhaps, Will has a serious medical condition - perhaps a brain lesion. Will and Vance discuss Will's possible medical condition during their golf game; Vance postulates that Will may have some sort of brain lesion. Will tends to focus on concepts or events that he deems as factual, while in fact the concepts or events are fictive. Nevertheless, Will plays a solid game of golf that seems to vindicate his claim of excellent health and mental aptitude.

Section 2 - Will owns a Luger handgun and is fascinated by it. One day he takes it out on a drive and shoots it into a deserted canyon. He then smells the gun. He reminisces about his wife who died six months previously - she had originally been a Peabody and her family was incredibly wealthy and very influential. Will drives home and sits in his garage contemplating his gun and automobiles. Then a bullet enters the garage from outside and ricochets around. Will drops to the ground and rolls underneath an automobile. He experiences a moment of clarity. He realizes that the shot is a stray hunting round discharged by Ewell McBee, a childhood associate who frequently poaches game from Will's large wooded estate.

## Part 1, Chapter 1 Analysis

Will Barrett is introduced as a principle character and is one of the novel's primary protagonists. He is clearly having some type of difficulty with coordination, although whether this is medically based is not yet established. His friend and golfing partner is a medical doctor and feels that Will's episodes and falling are fairly clear indications of some type of medical problem, though Will is not certain. He has come up with a plan to shoot himself - at first, it was just a random thought, but slowly it has coalesced into a vague decision. Will focuses on things that he believes to be real but in fact are not. For example, he is convinced that Jews are emigrating from North Carolina and feels that this signals some type of impending disaster while in fact Jews are not leaving the State. Will and his golf partners take his exceptional play as evidence that after all his health is probably good.

Will owns a handgun - strangely an anachronistic Luger - and appears to hold some type of fetish for it. He fondles it and closely examines it, discharges it and smells it, and looks at it some more. Given his plan to shoot himself his focus on a gun seems disturbing. Ironically, while he sits in his car contemplating shooting himself, he is



actually accidentally shot at by an acquaintance that is out hunting. He reacts by seeking safety and comically pointing his handgun out toward the woods from whence the stray shot originated.

The narrative makes reference to Will smelling "cordite" (p. 15) from the fired gun - an unfortunate but common literary mistake referencing an obsolescent British propellant not used in modern ammunition. The smell of 'cordite' is later mentioned elsewhere in the text, for example once again on page 60.



# Part 1, Chapter 2

## Part 1, Chapter 2 Summary

Allison wanders through Linwood, North Carolina. She is unsure where she is, why she is there, and even unsure of her own name. She buys some supplies with cash and then receives a haircut. She has a small notebook which contains notes that she has written to herself. The notes tell her that her parents have forcibly committed her to a mental hospital where she has been receiving electroconvulsive therapy. The therapy causes her to lose her memory. The notebook details an escape plan that Allison has followed to leave the asylum and travel to Linwood. She has selected Linwood as her destination, the notebook tells her, because her Aunt Sally Kemp has recently died and left Allison a large amount of land and some money as an inheritance. The notebook instructs Allison to travel to her aunt's house and take possession of it. She asks a policeman for directions and he shows her where the house is located but notes that he believes it is no longer there. Allison then strikes out to take possession of her newly inherited house.

## Part 1, Chapter 2 Analysis

This chapter focuses on the experiences of Allison as she arrives in the town of Linwood. She has no memory and must check her identification to remember her own name. The notebook is full of exact instructions that purport to have been written by Allison herself before a round of electroconvulsive therapy. Allison does not actually know anything except for what she reads from the notebook. It is organized into activities and information appropriate to each step of a plan - and each step ends with an instruction to stop reading and start executing. Allison has followed her own instructions to herself, often without really knowing why. Her haircut is a drastic cut and presumably helps to make her more anonymous. Allison is clearly not functioning completely normally through much of the chapter although most other people don't seem to notice her peculiar behavior. The chapter is notable for being the first of three chapters in the novel without further division into sections.





# Part 1, Chapter 3

## Part 1, Chapter 3 Summary

Section 1 - Will's golf game suffers from a recently acquired tendency to slice. He also continues to have episodes where he experiences a type of flashback. After his first slice, he is assisted in hunting for his errant ball by Lewis Peckham, who is a professional golfer and Will's friend. Out in the rough Lewis points out a small cave opening and tells Will that the fissure leads to a larger cave that Lewis owns.

After another slice, Will searches through the wooded rough by himself and experiences an extended flashback. He recalls that as a twelve year-old boy he was exceptionally detached and emotionally distant from his father, while his father was always very emotional.

He remembers going on one quail hunting trip with his father where nothing went right. After the guide's dog blew another covey of quail, Will's father shot the dog from a distance and the guide and his dog thereafter left the hunt. Will and his father had continued alone searching for singles in the woods, and Will remembers his father giving him a stern but strange lecture on how properly to cross a fence with a shotgun. They separate and when they draw together again, Will hears his father discharge a shot. They approach closer and Will sees his father and then his father swings toward him and discharges a second shot which strikes Will in the face, knocking him down. As he lies on the ground he hears his father reload and then hears another shot discharged. He staggers to his feet determined to avoid the need for assistance and feels the blood running down his face and neck. He walks to his father who is lying on the ground and discovers that he has somehow shot himself in the torso.

Will recovers though he is deaf in his left ear and has pocking on his left cheek. His father also survives. A local guide suggests that the shootings were somewhat suspicious but Will's mother rapidly insists that his father had fainted due to high blood pressure and accidentally discharged his shotgun once, wounding them both. Now, decades later, Will realizes that he has known something about the accident all along.

Section 2 - Will continues to play bad golf and listen to the obnoxious jokes of Jimmy Rogers. Jimmy, a childhood acquaintance, tells several stupid jokes and then mentions some vague business deal involving real estate. The deal somehow involves an old high-school girlfriend of Will's named Kitty. Will does not pay much attention. Jimmy comments that Will's recently deceased wife had owned "half the county." Although Will does not grasp Jimmy's intentions it is obvious that Jimmy is trying to encourage Will to put some money into the real estate venture.

Section 3 - Will once again stands in the wooded rough ostensibly looking for a sliced golf ball. He stands and reviews his previous life. He grew up in Mississippi with a vitriolic and emotional father who was enraged and defeated by life and hinted at vague



impasses in his own existence. After his father died, Will moved to New York City to literally and figuratively distance himself from his father. Will married Marion Peabody, a very wealthy, kindly, crippled woman. Will and Marion lived in New York City for twenty years where Will successfully practiced law and made even more money.

As he stands in the rough contemplating, Will thinks he sees someone watching him but he later decides it is just a trick of the light. He then earnestly searches for his lost golf balls and happens upon a large old greenhouse just off the edge of the course. The greenhouse is build against a ridgeline. As he considers the greenhouse, which appears long abandoned, he is greeted by a young woman that he first mistakes for a boy. She is dressed in oversized clothing and has wide-spaced gray eyes and white skin. She hands him his golf balls and engages him in an abortive and strange conversation. Will decides that she is high on drugs and believes her to be another vagrant traveling through the area. He then returns to the clubhouse.

## Part 1, Chapter 3 Analysis

Chapter 3 continues to develop Will as a character and provides background about his upbringing and earlier life. He was born in Mississippi and his father was apparently gregarious, vitriolic, and outwardly fairly passionate about everything. Will is private and subtle and found his father's public outbursts awkward. Will remembers being hugged by his father and feeling no emotion except irritation at being restrained. Will then remembers a hunting trip with his father and runs through the details of a putatively accidental shooting accident. He remembers how a local guide had scoured the area and found three empty hulls and one dead quail. Will remembers breaking his father's shotgun to discover a fourth empty hull. This causes Will to think that his father was not altogether straightforward in claiming the accident happened in a certain way and begins to realize that his father's lecture about gun handling perhaps had a hidden meaning. Will feels that he is arriving in his life at a place where his father had once arrived.

Will then remembers his middle years where he lived and worked in New York City as an attorney. He had been successful and made a large amount of money although in retrospect he considers the twenty years frivolous - he considers himself to have been a failure as a Yankee. He then stumbles upon a greenhouse and meets Allison, the other primary protagonist of the novel. Their initial encounter is inauspicious - she is confusing and confused and he assumes she is a vagrant high on drugs. Nevertheless, he finds that she distantly reminds him of something from his past. The chapter concludes by contrasting Will and Allison: Allison remembers nearly nothing, Will remembers nearly everything; he is an aging man, she a young women; he is affluent and she appears destitute; yet they are both socially odd.



# Part 1, Chapter 4

## Part 1, Chapter 4 Summary

Section 1 - Allison patters around her newly inherited and recently claimed greenhouse. She begins to remember some experiences at the mental hospital from the time before she received electroconvulsive therapy. She remembers that her father always found her a disappointing child. She remembers how her mother had found her, an adult, hiding in a closet in her own apartment. Allison had been trying to go down inside of herself but her mother instead committed her to the sanatorium. Allison still believes the only way for her to heal is to gown inside of herself even though Dr. Duk, her psychiatrist, would disagree.

Section 2 - Allison accidentally finds the basement of a house that burned down. She realizes it was the house next to the greenhouse - now her house. She looks around the basement and finds a huge cast-iron stove that she wants to get up and out of the basement so she can use it to keep the greenhouse warm during the coming winter. She thinks she should have asked Will to assist because she could see that he was eager to do anything that would distract him from thinking. Allison remembers having sex and using drugs and remembers talking with another patient in the sanatorium.

She remembers how her parents had visited her in the sanatorium only a few times over the last year. On the last occasion they told her they were en route to a party being hosted by Will Barrett, and Allison listens while her parents explain that her mother used to date Will. The party is for Will's daughter, Leslie, who is engaged to be married.

Section 3 - Will returns a while later and brings a bag of food as a gift. He discovers that Allison is successfully moving the enormous stove by using a block and tackle. He offers to help but she declines, desiring to complete the task by herself. The two characters talk to each other - Allison's statements are largely nonsensical but that does not appear to bother Will, who mostly talks past her. After a few minutes, Allison becomes uneasy and wishes Will would leave. As he leaves he falls down, then gets up again. He then gives her instructions on how to move the stove and tells her where she can borrow the tools she will need.

Section 4 - Allison remembers that on their last visit to the sanatorium her parents had a putatively private conversation with Dr. Duk in his office. Although excluded, Allison eavesdropped on the conference and learned that she had just inherited the property of her Aunt Sally Kerr. Allison's father noted that Sally isn't even Allison's real aunt. Allison, however, was the only one who would ever listen to Sally talk. Allison learned that she inherited an island worth more than two million dollars as well as an eight-hundred-acre estate bordering the golf course in Linwood, North Carolina. She remembers then stealing several hundred dollars out of her father's pocket, returning to her room, and beginning to write instructions to herself.

## Part 1, Chapter 4 Analysis

Chapter 4, the second longest chapter in the novel, continues to develop Allison as a character. Allison appears to be largely self-sufficient and more or less normal in many respects. She has a clear desire to be alone, though when alone she is fairly capable of even complex tasks and long-term planning. When Allison is not alone she feels nervous and incapable of performing even basic functions. She frequently does not know what to say, and usually takes words at their face value, which causes her to be confused by most colloquialisms. She also attracts an apparently stray dog that wanders around and through the greenhouse and becomes her companion. She finds Will's visit primarily uninteresting and although she is polite and standoffish, she wishes that he would leave long before she finally asks him to go.

Allison continues to remember her previous history and put the fragmentary memories back into a complete timeline, though obviously gaps yet remain. Her reminiscing about her parents' last visit to the sanatorium is very well written and is one of the most enjoyable sections of the novel's first part.

Allison's real aunt had lived with 'Aunt' Sally for many years and had incorrectly assumed that on Sally's passing she would inherit the sizeable estate. Instead, Sally left the entire estate to Allison because throughout life Allison was the only person, although then a child, to whom Sally could speak without being interrupted or contradicted. Allison realizes the irony in this because instead of listening attentively through care or affection, Allison listened because she was socially inept and did not know how to break off the lengthy conversations.



# Part 1, Chapter 5

## Part 1, Chapter 5 Summary

Section 1 - Will travels to a local church and meets Reverend Jack Curl. Jack asks Will to consider donating three million dollars to assist in the construction of a retirement villa for aged Christian couples. Will remembers that his dead wife Marion had made him promise to retain the family house so that their daughter Leslie would have a stable place to live. Jack mentions that Leslie wants to write her own vows for her pending wedding and asks Will to intervene.

Will then returns to his automobile and fondles his Luger. He remembers that his father had taken it from an SS Colonel during World War II. While Will sits in the car, Jack remembers one last thing to tell him and walks over. Will hides the Luger and Jack invites Will to a Christian retreat. Will asks Jack if he truly believes in God and Jack becomes uncomfortable but answers in the affirmative. Will thinks about his father's suicide and decides that he should have attempted to ascertain if God lived before killing himself - he owed that much to Episcopal rectitude. Will believes that his father died of anger and that his death was pointless. Will decides he will try to discover if God exists before he kills himself; Will postulates that if God does not somehow manifest Himself that the lack of any answer functionally equates to a proof of the non-existence of God.

Section 2 - Will has several guests at his house for a social event. Kitty and her husband are two of the guests. Will finds Kitty attractive and notes she is strong with freckled shoulders. She wears copious heavy gold jewelry that clanks when she moves. Will's daughter Leslie is also at the gathering. Will notes that although she is always clean and pretty she wears a perpetual frown that has creased her face. Kitty talks to Will and he comes to the realization that the girl he met at the greenhouse is Kitty's daughter Allison. He realizes that Kitty does not know where her daughter is. Will is absentminded but vaguely discerns that Kitty and her husband want something from him. Later when Kitty and Will are alone, she propositions him and asks him to sneak out and meet her in private. Will agrees, noting how physically attractive Kitty is. He then thinks about hunting and again remembers the hunting trip he had taken with his father where he had been shot.

Section 3 - Will leaves his guest and goes to his room where he finds his father's old shotgun, a W. W. Greener, and examines it. It is a 12-gauge cylinder-bore double with two triggers. He assembles the gun, remembering that it was not only his father's gun but his grandfather's gun as well. After the gun is assembled and cocked, he shoulders it and pulls both triggers simultaneously. Due to a defect in the firing mechanism, both hammers drop at the same time. Will then counts out the shots he remembers from the hunting trip long ago. The first shot was for the single quail. The next two shots, which sounded only as one shot, struck Will, and the final shot - the hull Will had found in the chamber - struck Will's father. Will notes that the gun is short enough to be easily used



to shoot one's self. He then realizes that his father had deliberately discharged both barrels at him - had probably tried to kill him. Will wonders if this is a new realization or if he had known it for his whole life. He wonders how his father - an expert wingshot - had missed him at fifteen feet, and how he had essentially missed himself at a range of inches. He wonders if his father intentionally shot high or pulled high at the last moment. He remembers how his father had, later, killed himself in the attic of the family's Mississippi home, using the same W. W. Greener shotgun. Will had later cleaned the shotgun and stored it away.

Section 4 - Lewis Peckham, the golf professional, comes to Will's study and sees him holding the shotgun. They talk about hunting and other subjects. It is evident that Lewis and Will have been good friends for many, many years. Will thinks that, like himself, Lewis is a "non-believer;" that is, an atheist. Will believes that non-Christians are exceptionally rare in North Carolina. Lewis invites Will to come over for the evening and Will demurs, but then accepts a proposed day of wingshooting. As Lewis continues to talk, Will thinks about Kitty's physical attractiveness and then finds his own unbelief in Christianity to be crazy and somehow distasteful. He remembers how his deceased wife Marion had a limp caused by polio and how she had become enormously fat after they had married.

Section 5 - Will and Lewis return to the social. Will acknowledges Ed and Marge Cupp, the parents of Jason Cupp, his daughter's fiancy. A general pre-wedding discussion is held to which Will pays only scant attention. Instead he remembers how Marion had been worth forty millions of dollars and how she had been happy and religious. He again remembers how she had grown fat after they had married. He listens while Leslie explains that she and Jason have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ and do not need the trappings of religion to validate their salvation. Will thinks of various events that he has experienced for the final time. He concludes that only loving and dying are real.

Section 6 - During the social, Kitty approaches Will numerous times and always manages to physically touch him, usually by bumping him with her hip. She talks to Will about her daughter Allison, and Will then remembers that her daughter's name is Allison, or Allie. Kitty makes vague allusions to turning down a marriage proposal from Will, many years ago - Will does not remember proposing marriage but does not discount her claim. Kitty then reminisces about having sex with Will and insinuates that, perhaps after all, Allison is his daughter or at least could be. Kitty suggests that Will talk to Allison. Will remembers that once he had taken an impromptu road trip across the county to visit Kitty's brother Sutter Vaught. Sutter had been marking time as a Veteran's Administration employee in Santa Fe.

Section 7 - During the social Leslie continues to argue about religion, which makes Jack Curl visible distressed. Will tries to intervene and redirect the conversation but instead gets a lecture from Leslie. Will becomes agitated and calls to Yamaiuchi, the servant, who attempts to ignore the summons. Will becomes strangely infuriated and denigrates Yamaiuchi. Nearly immediately, however, Will begins to wonder at the source of his meteoric response. He recalls that his father was similarly emotional.



Section 8 - A few minutes later, Will sneaks out of the house to meet Kitty for what he hopes will be a sexual encounter. He walks down the stairs into his garage but passes out and tumbles down the stairs, injuring his head. When he comes to, he tries to ascertain whether he has been physically injured by the fall. Strangely, an uninvited Ewell walks into his garage and begins to talk to him as though nothing was wrong. Will responds by trying to appear normal, lounging on the stairs with a bleeding head. Ewell again pushes his video cassette business idea to Will, inviting Will to a party where he will be joined by Cheryl Lee, the young erotic actress from Ewell's latest film. Ewell bluntly states that Will can have sex with her, but Will is evasive. Ewell erupts into a furious tirade and randomly mentions that Cheryl Lee is the stage name of Sarah Goodman, a Jew. Will becomes immediately interested and asks where Sarah lives. Ewell tells Will about Sarah and then Will believes he must have passed out again because suddenly Ewell is gone.

Section 9 - Will sits on the stairs and realizes that his theory about the Jews must be incorrect. Instead, he decides on a new plan and has an epiphany. He believes his father's suicide to have been wasted as nothing was demonstrated by it - it was just an ending to a life. Will plans his own suicide with a plan in mind. He will use his own death to prove something valuable. He abandons his potential sexual encounter with Kittie and goes to his room where he writes two letters. The first letter is to Lewis Peckham and states simply that he plans to visit on the next day and will walk through Lewis' cave on the way - he plans to enter the fissure near the golf course and spelunk through the cave to near Lewis' house.

The second letter is addressed to Dr. Sutter Vaught. Within this letter, Will encloses the letter penned to Lewis. He asks Sutter to help him in a grand experiment. If Sutter has not heard from Will in three weeks he should take the letter to Lewis and soil it to make it appear it had been on the street for some time, then travel to Linwood and mail the letter. Will explains that he plans to conduct a grand experiment that will either prove the existence of God or result in his death. Since his death will be therefore a de facto act of God - rather in inaction - his life insurance policy will be legally valid. In return for Sutter's assistance, Will has appointed him as his life insurance beneficiary. Will's letter to Sutter is long and somewhat rambling.

Will's plan essentially is to enter a cave with a large supply of sleeping pills. Inside the cave he will take sleeping pills, sleep, awake, and pray for a sign of the existence of God. Failing a manifestation, he will take more pills and repeat the process. Will expects he will live only a few days before starving to death. If God manifests then Will plans to exit the cave and pursue a Christian life. If God does not manifest then Will will die and thus prove the non-existence, or at least the non-involvement, of God.

## **Part 1, Chapter 5 Analysis**

Chapter 5, by far the largest chapter in the novel, provides most of the critical development that transpires during Part One of the novel. Previous chapters have essentially served to establish character firmly and construct a richly textured setting



where characters' motivations are defined and intelligible. Chapter 5 departs from this narrative construction to develop the novel's central conflict as well as to fully develop Will's increasingly agitated state of mind.

Most of Chapter 5 takes place in Will's house and focuses on a social gathering that features most of the novel's principle characters as well as most of the minor characters. The social event is to discuss and plan for Leslie and Jason Cupp's forthcoming wedding. Leslie is very opinionated and makes numerous decisions that her future parents-in-law and others do not agree with. However, Jason apparently timidly and certainly quietly acquiesces to Leslie's decisions. Throughout the event, Will is notably distracted, and several of the guests and his daughter comment on this fact. While the various conversations are held around him, Will stands in isolated contemplation of prior events in his life.

From time to time, several of the guests, primarily Kitty and her husband, approach Will and engage him in discussions which indicate they want his advice or money or both. Will does not pay enough attention to the conversation to even realize what it is about although clearly Kitty is seeking his legal advice on trusts and estates so that she can somehow wrest control of Allison's newly inherited estate. Perhaps in response to Will's apparent disinterest in becoming involved, Kitty then begins to touch and jostle him and then arranges to meet him some time later for a private tryst. Will probably correctly assumes that Kitty is suggesting quick and somewhat discreet sexual intercourse. His reaction is interesting as it flickers between excited contemplation and total disinterest. This rapid transition of Will's state of mind illustrates perhaps better than any other portion of the narrative how detached Will typically is from normal events.

When Will falls down the garage stairs he is surprised to see Ewell approaching, and rightly so - Ewell has not been invited to the house, but has nevertheless come to the house and walked unannounced into Will's garage. Ewell's focus is so intense that he apparently does not even realize that Will's sprawling position is unusual - it is as if Ewell naturally expects to find Will bleeding and lazing on the garage stairway while his guests circulate inside. Ewell rather bluntly promises sexual intercourse with a young erotic actress if Will infuses cash into Ewell's exploit. Will is disinterested until Ewell happens to mention that the actress is coincidentally a Jew who lives in North Carolina and does not plan on moving. This single random event causes Will to reevaluate his previous notion that the Jews were leaving the State and thus signals a momentous occasion. Will nearly immediately latches on to a new plot and decides that his suicide will be so arranged that it will not legally be a suicide and will result, in his mind, from God's inaction rather than his own action. Will's subsequent intense letter writing sets up the novel's central conflict and describes his proposed course of action in broad details.





# Part 1, Chapter 6

## Part 1, Chapter 6 Summary

Allison goes into town and buys supplies so she can move the huge stove into the greenhouse. She stops by Will's auto dealership and picks up four creepers. She then returns to her greenhouse and contemplates how she will move the stove. She decides that it is actually too heavy to move in the way that Will had suggested, thus making the creepers she has obtained seemingly irrelevant. Instead, Allison decides to disassemble the stove and move it piecemeal into the greenhouse where she will reassemble it. She considers the stove in great detail and then cleans it and polishes some of the fixtures. She then begins to disassemble the stove and to haul the pieces - each still very heavy - into the greenhouse.

## Part 1, Chapter 6 Analysis

Chapter 6, the shortest chapter in the novel, is the second of three chapters in the novel not further divided into sections. Allison again proves herself capable of action by going into town and buying various supplies needed to move and install the stove. She asserts herself at Will's auto store and holds some interesting if bland conversations to obtain four creepers. Upon returning to the greenhouse, however, she abandons Will's plan in favor of her original idea to dismantle the stove and move it piecemeal. The narrative description of Allison's consideration of the wonders and construction of the antique stove is one of the most lyrical passages in the entire novel. The brief nature of the chapter contrasts markedly with the extended nature of the previous chapter. Allison's concise mental processes and directed behavior also contrast starkly with Will's belabored introspection and wandering concentration. As Allison works toward a definitive goal, Will wanders from conversation to conversation without really listening to any of them.



# Part 1, Chapter 7

## Part 1, Chapter 7 Summary

Section 1 - Will dresses, leaves his study, and goes to town, abandoning Kitty to solitude as she waits for him. In town, he mails the letter to Sutter and buys some minor supplies. He makes sure he is seen and ensures that the store clerk notices he is in a particularly good mood as he allows her to assume he is on his way to a fishing trip. He then walks to the golf course and nonchalantly walks to the fissure that leads to Lewis' cave. Will squeezes into the fissure and then crawls along a very narrow passage until he arrives at a steep but larger opening. He continues for some time until he comes to the area of the cave with which he is familiar. There he explores until he finds a particular feature he is interested in. He climbs up a steep passage and enters a blind room, making sure to leave obvious clues so that his body will be found should he die. He then notes the comforting presence of a pool of water and exults in his decision to test God's will. Either God will manifest himself and Will will thereafter live a life of Christian duty, or God will not manifest and the obviously mentally unstable Will will starve to death.

Section 2 - Will remains in the cave for several days while he sleeps and awakens to have various strange metaphoric epiphanies, most focusing on his father and his own early life. He also remembers Leslie delivering a rather stern and uncompassionate lecture directly after his dead wife's funeral. Then Will wakes up with a toothache and begins to vomit. The pain and nausea drive him to abandon his quest and he tries to leave the cave only to fall a long distance and receive various wounds. He crawls around the cave with a tiny flashlight and becomes hopelessly lost. He finally stumbles upon an exit and crawls through it only to discover that once again he is falling, and he blacks out.

Section 3 - Will comes to and discovers he is in Allison's greenhouse - the hole through which he fell is in fact a cut vent that joins the greenhouse to the cave to stabilize the greenhouse's internal temperature throughout the year. Allison is startled but uses her block and tackle to hoist Will onto her bed where she strips him and bathes him. She cares for him for a few hours until he regains his full senses. Will looks around the greenhouse and discovers that Allison successfully has moved the stove, which is now functional.

## Part 1, Chapter 7 Analysis

Chapter 7 describes the events of Will's attempt to force God's hand. Will plans carefully and then secrets himself in Lost Cove cave where he plans either to demonstrate conclusively the existence of God or to die of starvation. Unfortunately for Will the answer is not "yes" or "no" but a confusing "maybe." His toothache pain and nausea drives his plan from his mind and he seeks to escape the cave and find dental



assistance. It is quite interesting to note, however, that Will in fact never does receive dental care in the novel and yet his toothache pain vanishes when he escapes the cave.

It is evident by this point in the novel that Will is mentally unstable - his quest to prove the existence of God is thought up nearly spontaneously during a social event and he abandons attendance at his daughter's wedding to lie in dark cave mud and starve to death. Perhaps fortunately for everyone, Will's quest ends and he manages to wander his way out of the cave and quite literally fall into Allison's greenhouse. She is startled but not surprised and immediately begins to care for Will. She finds his unconsciousness reassuring and non-threatening.



# Part 2, Chapter 1

## Part 2, Chapter 1 Summary

Section 1 - Allison remembers having hoisted Will onto her bed where she stripped him and bathed him. She makes some simple food and when Will awakens, she feeds him.

Section 2 - Allison realizes that prior to Will's entrance she had started to mentally slip. His dramatic arrival has startled her into action. Will gives Allison a mental focus that is unlike the presence of other individuals. She remembers that the last time she went to town she had received various stares from the town's regular inhabitants.

Section 3 - Allison reviews several notes she has written to herself regarding her desire for the future and her plans. She ponders love and sex and their seeming relatedness. She thinks about the nature of being home and having a home.

Section 4 - Over the course of several days Will recovers his strength under Allison's care. When he is back to sorts, he thanks her for her care and asks her to perform several errands. She sends a telegram to Sutter and then requests that Dr. Vance Battle stop by the greenhouse to check on Will.

Section 5 - Allison completes her several errands and feels positive and energized. She bizarrely begins to think of marrying Will. She plans an evening meal for two and spends most of her remaining money buying steaks and wine.

Section 6 - Allison returns to the greenhouse and is disappointed to discover that Will is not inside and she mistakenly believes he has left. She then spends several minutes contemplating how to fashion an air-venting system to distribute the temperate air issuing from the cave throughout the entire greenhouse. When she goes outside, she stumbles upon Will who is nearly passed out in the grass. As she assists him back inside she notes his body is trembling and very cold. Inside she strips him and puts him in her sleeping bag. She then strips naked herself and crawls in next to him where she snuggles up to him and warms his body with hers. As Will warms up they talk, and Will tells her that Vance has already stopped by. Will insists that he is all right and Allison believes she has fallen in love with him. Will explains that her mother Kitty wants him to be Allison's legal guardian. He explains some of the legalities about the situation to her and Allison decides that she wants Will to be her guardian.

They remain in the sleeping bag and later that evening a huge lightning storm rages outside. Will continues to talk to Allison but she can't hear him over the crashing of the thunder. As the storm passes Will tells Allison he plans to return to his home to pursue a life of social philanthropy. Allison becomes slightly agitated when she thinks of Will's impending departure.



## Part 2, Chapter 1 Analysis

Allison feels invigorated by Will's presence - he needs her care and for some reason he does not intimidate her as do other people. Instead, Will's presence is somewhat akin to her dog's presence in being benign yet enjoyable. Allison regains mental focus while caring for Will and, later, while executing his list of errands. She begins to feel that she is Will's employee performing tasks for which she will receive remuneration. Allison's dialogue with Dr. Vance Battle is humorous and well written. Allison then begins to strangely contemplate being married to Will despite their relatively new acquaintance and their disparate age.

She returns to the greenhouse and initially believes that Will has abandoned her. The thought is disappointing but not devastating. Then she finds Will nearly unconscious and having tremors on the grass outside. In a sensual but not sexual encounter, she warms him up by placing her naked body against his naked body, both together in a sleeping bag. They spend several hours lying naked together without any overtly sexual activity. Allison's consideration of Will's thin, injured, cold, and strong body is interesting. It is ironic indeed that several days ago Will was considering having an extra-marital affair with Allison's mother Kitty only to later lie naked with the daughter. At this point in the novel, Allison definitely seems more capable than Will, although both characters are largely seemingly irrational in their beliefs and behaviors.



## Part 2, Chapter 2

### Part 2, Chapter 2 Summary

Will leaves the greenhouse and walks to his car that Allison has retrieved. He gets in his car and looks around, and then gets in the back seat. He remembers the hunting trip where his father shot him. He thinks that he has learned a deep existential truth. Will knows that he will not let various forms of living death overtake him - he will live. Will thinks of all the various existential things that won't be able to defeat him. He then goes to sleep in the back of his car in the parking lot of the Linwood golf course.

### Part 2, Chapter 2 Analysis

Chapter 2, the second-shortest chapter in the novel, is the third of three chapters not further sub-divided into sections. The chapter is dominated by Will's existential rambling thoughts about the nature of life, death, and a sort of death-in-life where conventions overpower one's will and destroy meaning. Will realizes he will be able to live beyond the conventional bounds of society and therefore will have a meaningful life; he will not need to commit suicide to create meaning. In this way, he rejects his father's earlier lessons and suicide to instead embrace an alternative way to live and think about life. Incidentally, this day is Will's 55th birthday.



## Part 2, Chapter 3

### Part 2, Chapter 3 Summary

Section 1 - Will wakes up in his car after sleeping all night and almost all of the next day. He wakes up when Kitty taps on the window. Kitty climbs in the front seat and talks to Will. She tells him that Leslie and Jason were married and that Leslie then shut down his house and moved out. Kitty says that Leslie and Jack are planning on how to liquidate most of Will's estate. Kitty then explains that she has separated from her husband and he has left the area. She flirts with Will and then tells him she has decided to have Allison committed once she manages to locate her. Kitty tells Will that in a previous life Allison was a Civil War prostitute and spy which caused bad karma that is now ruining her ability to have a good life.

Section 2 - Will goes home and starts seeing double. He falls down again. The house is empty - the servants discharged and the furniture gone. He looks in his closet and sees his case W. W. Greener shotgun and holstered Luger pistol, along with a new set of clothes. He bathes, shaves, and reads a letter from Leslie that explains she wants to start controlling the estate. The letter asks him to come to her new home in town. Will drives into town but on the trip again has doubled vision and vertigo. His car swerves and then leaves the road, ending up suspended in the air in a huge maple tree. Deciding that exiting the vehicle in the dark might be dangerous, Will goes to sleep for the night.

Section 3 - Will wakes up and wanders into town. He is disoriented and meets a stranger who talks a lot. Will decides he will return to Georgia and buy the piece of swamp property where his father shot him. He buys a bus ticket and rides the bus for a few minutes but then changes his mind and demands to be let off the bus. The bus driver refuses and Will threatens him with physical violence. The bus slows down and Will tries to jump out. Instead, he trips and catches his foot in the door so that he is dragged along the pavement, face down. He blacks out.

Section 4 - Will comes to in a hospital. Leslie, Jason, Jack, Vance, and another doctor are in his room. After some light conversation, he talks to Vance and the other doctor. Will is diagnosed with Hausmann's Syndrome, essentially an imbalance in his body's internal pH. The imbalance is very slight but leads to mood swings, depression, fugues, and so-called inappropriate longings. Other than Hausmann's Syndrome, Will physically is in good shape.

### Part 2, Chapter 3 Analysis

Will's strange voyage of physical hardships continues. First Kitty wakes him up after he spends twenty-four hours sleeping in the back seat of his car. She tells him of her separation and directly hints that she and Will would make a fine couple. She also tells



him that Leslie and Jason are not offended at his strange absence from their wedding. Kitty finally leaves Will with a bewildering story about Allison's previous life as a camp follower and prostitute during the Civil War which, Kitty feels, adequately explains Allison's current mental condition.

When Will goes home he finds the house closed down. The long-term servants have been dismissed. His ex-wife's automobiles and belongings are gone - in fact, the house is nearly empty. Only a few personal things remain. Leslie clearly intends to take over most, if not all, of Will's estate and administer it as she sees fit. Will is being treated as mentally incompetent - although perhaps he is. He later experiences a severe accident while driving and spends another night sleeping in his car, then wanders around the town seemingly out of his mind, finally taking a bus trip to purchase a piece of George swampland. Then, Will seems to have a moment of clarity and requests to be let off the bus. However, when the driver refuses to stop the express bus, Will flies into an uncharacteristic rage and makes threats. The episode ends with Will being dragged along the highway. Will has been drugged and starved, has continually fallen down and experienced fugues, has dropped thirty feet down a cave, crawled through narrow muddy passages for hours, fallen perhaps twenty feet onto the greenhouse's concrete floor, wrecked his automobile, and has been dragged along the highway by a bus. His physical ordeals are finally over, however. Miraculously he seems physically unharmed and his only medical "problem" is diagnosed as a preexisting condition - Hausmann's Syndrome.

Hausmann's Syndrome is described as a pervasive mental condition caused by tiny changes in hydrogen ions within the body - that is, a shift in pH. The doctors tell Will he must be continually monitored and thus assume he will be living in a continuous-care facility. In fact, he is summarily sent to the very facility that he and Marion established. Throughout nearly the entire period, Will acts befuddled and confused, if happy. He is apparently content to be shuttled off to the old folks' home to watch television programs for the remainder of his days.





## Part 2, Chapter 4

### Part 2, Chapter 4 Summary

Section 1 - Will is sent to the convalescent home where he begins, apparently, to recover. He can't drive but he can play golf pretty well.

Section 2 - One day Will meets an old puttering man who lives at the convalescent home. Even though the home has a staff of gardeners, the old man waters plants and rakes leaves. Will thinks the man will probably live for many, many years.

Section 3 - One day Jack meets Will and walks around the convalescent home with him, introducing him to some of the other people receiving long-term care. Many of the people are strange or simply unresponsive.

Section 4 - Will calls Vance and asks some vague questions about his medical condition but Vance is evasive. Will hangs up and thinks about watching television. He suddenly realizes he has been committed to the old folks' home. He realizes that Leslie had planned to move him here before his condition was even known or diagnosed.

Section 5 - Will is apparently sedated but in any event is stupefied and typically laconic. Kitty barges into his room unannounced and berates him - she has learned where Allison is and has learned that not only did Will know of her whereabouts all along, but in fact was living with her. Kitty assumes the worst, which after all is probably correct, and briefly assaults Will before running from the room. Will continues to sit and watch television with some of the other convalescents until he becomes involved in another strange altercation. He then wanders into the hallway where he discovers Kitty is still waiting around. She informs him that he is not personally free to leave the premises and they have a somewhat more restrained conversation. Will realizes that he does not particularly want to leave the convalescent home.

### Part 2, Chapter 4 Analysis

This brief chapter makes it apparent that Will has clearly completely broken down mentally. Instead of pondering the existence of God and ruminating on various existential metaphors, he stares at vapid television re-runs and babbles with nearly incoherent fellow convalescents. From time to time, he realizes his condition is ridiculous, but he seems uninterested in remedying it. Instead, he thinks about watching television. Will's breakdown is an apparent major turning point in the novel - indeed Will's complacent presence in the old folks' home is unexpected, ironic, and somewhat depressing.



## Part 2, Chapter 5

### Part 2, Chapter 5 Summary

Section 1 - Only one hour later, Will suddenly seems to regain his senses. He realizes that he has not taken his treatment for several hours and he suddenly has a great desire to see Allison again. He changes clothes and nonchalantly leaves the convalescent home. He drives to Allison's greenhouse, noting the car handles better than ever despite its recent crash into a maple tree. Will drives and sees well. He finds Allison and kisses her, then both character express affection for each other. Will asks Allison what she wants and then takes the situation in hand. He tells Allison that her mother, Dr. Duk, and a sheriff are *en route* to return her to Valleyhead Sanatorium. To avoid them, Will proposes to take Allison to a local hotel and she agrees.

Section 2 - Will takes Allison to a local hotel and they check in. Allison bathes while Will runs some errands.

Section 3 - Will visits a local attorney. Will discusses a legal defense strategy for Allison's case with the attorney, and the attorney agrees that the defense is very likely winnable. Will then asks for a job as a law clerk and, after some confused discussion, the attorney agrees.

Section 4 - Will returns to the hotel and discovers that Allison is sound asleep in the bed. Will places a "do not disturb" sign on the door and then gets into bed with Allison.

Section 5 - Will dreams that his father is trying to convince him of the futility of life and talk him into committing suicide. Will's father comments that the guns - the W. W. Greener and the Luger - are in Will's automobile trunk. Will awakens, leaves the room, goes to his car, and retrieves the two weapons from the trunk. He then walks a short distance to a highway overpass and heaves the cased shotgun over, hearing but not seeing it clunk at it hits the ground. He then heaves the Luger.

Section 6 - Will returns to the hotel room. Allison asks him where he was going and with whom he was speaking - he does not offer a direct answer. Then Will and Allison spend two days and nights having sexual intercourse punctuated by room service and periods of sleep. At the end of their encounter, Will proposes marriage and Allison accepts.

Section 7 - Will and Allison make plans for marriage, obtaining jobs, making a living, living a life, and starting various businesses. Will decides he will give away all of Marion's money and rely on whatever he can make as a law clerk. He proposes that Allison retain and develop her estate and greenhouse and she agrees. Will thinks of the many idlers at the convalescent home and decides they would compose an ideal work force.



Section 8 - Will travels to the convalescent home and offers construction and carpentry jobs to some of the old men. He explains his plans and they readily accept, behaving strangely as if nothing extraordinary was occurring.

Section 9 - Will seeks out a convalescent who enjoys gardening. He offers the man a job in Allison's greenhouse. The man tentatively accepts and discusses various plans and strategies with Will.

Section 10 - Will talks to more convalescents and one of them advises him to simply hold on to his money. Will suddenly worries about losing Allison and abruptly halts the conversation.

Section 11 - Will returns to the greenhouse where he finds Allison singing. He comments on her beautiful voice and extraordinary talent. They have sex, chat about various things, and get ready to leave the greenhouse.

Section 12 - Will returns to the convalescent home and manages to corner an old, retired priest. Will is particularly frenzied and explains that he wants the priest to perform a wedding ceremony. The priest demurs on several grounds but Will persists. The priest suggests Jack would be a more suitable choice but Will persists. Eventually the priest tries to physically evade Will, but Will chases him around a desk while they discuss religion and philosophy. The priest notes that possessions yield unhappiness. Will takes the old man to be his personal manifestation of God - perhaps the old priest is actually Jesus in disguise.

## Part 2, Chapter 5 Analysis

Chapter 5 concludes the novel with a series of plot twists that are not altogether unanticipated. Will, after apparently giving up on life, suddenly awakens and rushes from the convalescent home to Allison. He informs her of her legal situation and rights, bluntly states his love for her, and whisks her off to a hotel where they physically consummate their prolonged but strange relationship. From this point on, the narrative develops along very predictable lines - Will establishes future plans, enlists competent help, and ensures Allison's legal future and his own financial survival.

Although the chapter does not present many notable plot developments, it is significant regarding the amount of narrative closure that is presented. For example, Will finally throws his shotgun and pistol away, symbolic of a final break with his father's suicide and his own dark tendency toward self-destruction. Will's subsequent discussions with the other convalescent patients - many of whom are severely crippled though not incapable - illustrate conclusively that Will has arrived at a turning point in his life.

The chapter contains dialogue that is noteworthy because it features Will as an actual participant. In previous extended dialogues throughout the novel, Will is very passive, with his participation consisting nearly entirely of meaningless contributions such as "really?" and "what?" and "ah." Meanwhile, the other character in the dialogue delivers what is essentially a monologue while Will's thoughts wander away. In this chapter,



however, Will participates meaningfully in nearly every verbal exchange. Allison, likewise, holds several extended conversations in this chapter, which is unusual. However, the long dialogue between Will and Allison toward the end of Section 1 is somewhat forced and overly constructed. Even though it reveals significant facts about the characters, it does not have the same flow and beauty as most of the other dialogue in the chapter and comes off as contrived.

The chapter concludes with Will accosting Father Weatherbee and demanding marriage. Weatherbee offers numerous excuses why his services would be unacceptable but Will deflects them with various philosophical arguments. At the novel's conclusion, Weatherbee's insightful pondering questions spark in Will the belief that he has finally received his own personal manifestation of God's existence. Will is shrewd enough to simultaneously note that he has not taken his medicine for a considerable period.



# Characters

## Williston ("Will") Bibb Barrett

Will Barrett is the principle protagonist of the novel and the focus of nearly two-thirds of the scenes described in the narrative. He additionally appears in many of the scenes not directly focused on his character. At the time of the novel, Will turns fifty-five years old, and spends his birthday asleep in the back seat of his car in a public parking lot.

Will was raised in the South and his mother apparently died when he was young, though the details of her death are not described in the novel. Will's father was an emotional and opinionated man who served as a combatant in the European theater during World War II. Although not stated in the novel, Will would have therefore been about nineteen - draft age - when his father was serving in the conflict; Will did not serve in the military.

When Will was about twelve his father took him on a quail hunting trip. During the trip, his father became enraged and drove off the guide and dogs. Will and his father then hunted for single birds until they flushed two birds. Will's father shot one bird, reloaded, and then delivered both barrels of shot toward Will, shooting slightly over his head at a distance of about fifteen feet. The shot knocked Will to the ground, damaged his cheek, and deafened him in one ear. Will's father then shot himself in the chest but the glancing pattern was not fatal. Will's father would later claim that the shootings had been accidental. Throughout his life, Will reflects on the hunting accident and relives it repeatedly. He eventually comes to the realization that his father had intentionally shot him and believes this was to teach him a lesson about the futility and fecklessness of life. Will's father subsequently committed suicide in the family attic by shooting himself in the head with the same shotgun. Will retains the shotgun throughout his life, finally discarding it when he defeats his own suicide impulse.

As an adult, Will lived in New York City where he practiced law. His career was enormously successful and Will amassed several millions of dollars. In New York City, he met and married Marion Peabody, herself an heiress to a vast financial estate. Marion, an invalid, suffered from obesity and gradually declining health. However, she was able to deliver and raise their daughter, Leslie. Eventually Will took a very early retirement and moved to Linwood, North Carolina, where he lived with Marion until her death. In Linwood, Marion and Will became significant donors to various philanthropic projects. After Marion's death, Will lived for several years in a sort of drifting life without much aim. During this time, he suffered depression and contemplated suicide. Will then suffers from various obsessions and finally attempts to demand a manifestation of God. Will is finally diagnosed with a rare mental condition akin to epilepsy. At roughly the same time he meets and falls in love with Allison Huger, the daughter of one of his old girlfriends. At the end of the novel, Will is once again on the mend and is looking forward to having children with Allison.



## Allison ("Allie") Hunnicutt Huger

Allison is the twenty-something daughter of Katherine and Walter Huger and is a principle protagonist in the novel. She is described as young and boyish-looking, very thin but strong and determined. Allison is mentally deranged and though the exact nature of her diagnosis is not revealed in the novel, it is probably a serious bipolar disorder. As a youth, Allison focused on developing her significant talent as a vocalist. However, the tension of public performances overwhelmed her and she abandoned her artistic pursuits. She later moved into her own apartment where her mother, Kitty, discovered her emaciated and hiding in the closet. Allison was subsequently committed to Valleyhead Sanatorium where she receives electroconvulsive therapy prescribed by Dr. Duk. Just prior to a course of therapy, Allison eavesdrops on her parents' conversation with Dr. Duk and learns that she has inherited a large estate from a recently deceased woman.

The therapy causes Allison to forget everything for several weeks, but using a notebook, she records various instructions to herself for after the therapy. Following a list of exact instructions, Allison escapes from the asylum and makes her way to her large estate that is located in Linwood, North Carolina. Allison's estate includes about 800 acres in Linwood and a coastal island worth at least 2.1 million dollars. However, Allison has very little care for money or worldly things. Still confused and depressed, she takes possession of a decrepit greenhouse which is the only structure remaining on her property. She cleans and repairs the greenhouse until she meets the older Will Barrett. Although Allison has a very difficult time communicating with others, Will seems to easily understand her and the two characters develop a strong relationship. The two characters fall in love over the course of several encounters, even as Allison physically cares for the ailing Will Barrett.

Allison's whereabouts are eventually discovered by her mother who plans to forcibly re-commit her to Valleyhead Sanatorium and assume legal control of her extensive estate. Allison evades her mother with Will's assistance and at the conclusion of the novel, she has a solid legal defense planned as well as establishing plans for future expansion of her estate and greenhouse.

## Marion Barrett nee Peabody

Marion is Will Barrett's deceased wife. Although she is not a character *per se* in the novel, Will and others refer her to frequently. She inherited a huge amount of family money - approximately \$40 millions - and was born and raised in Utica, New York. Marion was very religious and doted on the clergy and her church. She was fond of philanthropic efforts and gave away a lot of money. As a child, Marion suffered from polio, which permanently damaged her hipbone. Because of this, she limped throughout life and eventually required a wheelchair. After marrying Will, Marion began to compulsively eat and became enormously fat. She died from an infection that went undetected, apparently, because of her obesity. Will remembers her affectionately as "a



rich hardheaded plain decent crippled pious upstate Utica, New York, woman" (p. 72). Will and Marion's daughter, Leslie Barrett, assumes - as do most other characters in the novel - that Will married her for her money. Will's introspection makes it clear that this was not the case. Everyone remembers Marion fondly.

## **Dr. Vance Battle**

Vance Battle is a young general practitioner who is of a generally happy demeanor. He is a golf enthusiast and a regular golfing partner for Will Barrett - he is also Will's doctor and confidant. Vance uses numerous Southern country phrases and speaks with many amusing if often offensive colloquialisms. Vance believes that Will suffers from petit-mall epileptic seizures. A neurologist later confirms this diagnosis after extensive tests following Will's collapse. Vance is in nearly all respects a typical country doctor who is firmly entrenched in the upper class. Vance is a recurrent but minor character in the novel.

## **Leslie Barrett**

Leslie is Will and Marion Barrett's daughter. Her age is not specified but she is probably in her late 20s. She has long, straight, dark hair and is often described as physically attractive. However, Will notes that she is generally an angry person and her anger is expressed on her face, which is always frowning. She has deep lines in her forehead from frowning. During the novel, Leslie marries Jason Cupp in a simple and informal ceremony; they do not have a honeymoon, as they consider such conventions silly. Leslie is intensely religious but completely disdains organized religion. She instead focuses on developing a personal relationship with Jesus Christ and is portrayed as a "born-again" Christian. She wants to take control of Will's considerable estate and spend the money to build various "love-and-faith" retirement centers around the country. Toward this end she has Will committed to a convalescent home toward the end of the novel. Although Leslie is certainly competent and intelligent, she is markedly unsympathetic as a character.

## **Ewell McBee**

Ewell is a childhood friend of Will Barrett. Ewell grew up fairly poor but eventually become a somewhat successful businessman. He owned a film theater and other businesses for a number of years until falling on hard times. At the time of the novel, Ewell is nearly bankrupt. Ewell frequently poaches game from Will's extensive wooded estate and seems to feel that Will should be beholden to him due to their common childhood experiences. Ewell is an avowed atheist. During the period of the novel Ewell is producing erotic films for sale on video cassettes and tries several times to get Will interested in funding some of the company. On one occasion, Ewell arranges for Will to meet and have sexual intercourse with an erotic film starlet - an encounter that Will avoids.



## **Bert ("Bertie") Peabody**

Bert is Will Battle's brother-in law, the brother of Will's deceased wife Marion. Bertie is a golf enthusiast who regularly plays with Will. When Will turns 55 years old, Bertie is ecstatic because he finally imagines he will have a partner to play the senior tours. Bertie routinely tries to inflate his handicap to ensure success during competition. Bertie is a minor character in the novel.

## **Katherine ("Kitty") Vaught Huger**

Kitty was Will Barrett's high-school girlfriend. She remembers having sex with Will though he apparently does not remember the event which, to say the least, is peculiar. Kitty also remembers declining Will's marriage proposal - another event that Will does not recall though he at least admits it would have been possible. After breaking off her relationship with Will, Kitty met and married Walter Huger, a smiling and vapid dentist, and later gave birth to Allison Huger. Kitty is willfully convinced that Allison is mentally incompetent and seeks to have her forcibly committed so that she can assume control of Allison's windfall inheritance. Allison resists this because she feels she can recover and survive on her own.

Kitty is very physically attractive and an avid golfer. Will often focuses on her tanned and freckled shoulders, which are strong and lean, as well as her buttocks, which are apparently quite evocative. Throughout the novel, Kitty openly flirts with Will. Whenever they talk, she handles him as often as possible and frequently rubs her hips against him. On at least one occasion, she openly propositions him and arranges to meet him for an extramarital affair, a meeting that Will avoids. Toward the end of the novel, Kitty and Walter separate and Kitty subsequently suggests that she and Will would make an excellent couple. Kitty functions quite effectively as the novel's principle but subtle antagonist.

## **Ed Cupp**

Ed, Will's occasional golfing partner, is Jason Cupp's father. Ed is 6' 11," blonde, and a native Californian. He was a forward for UCLA. During the novel, Ed is in his late 40s and is an agreeable and quiet character. He apparently finds Will strange but acceptable and likable. Ed is a minor character in the novel.

## **Dr. Alistair ("Duk") Dukhipoor**

Dr. Duk, often "Dr. Duck," is a psychiatrist who practices at Valleyhead Sanatorium. He is apparently from Pakistan, if Allison's intuition is correct, and his English is somewhat stilted and contains numerous forced Southern colloquialisms which are somewhat misused. He is portrayed, primarily through Allison's eyes, as interested far more in money and prestige than in the health of his patients. For example, Dr. Duk is





apparently willing to conspire with Kitty Huger to essentially cheat Allison of her windfall inheritance. Dr. Duk is a firm believer in electroconvulsive therapy and frequently prescribes it for treatment. He is a minor character in the novel.

## Reverend Jack Curl

Jack is the priest of the local congregation where Marion worshipped before her death. He has remained in close contact with Will Barrett over the years, principally because Will is the primary donor to Jack's various social causes. Strangely for a priest, Jack is always very uncomfortable talking about religion. Will believes this may be because Jack has never managed to make a convert. Jack is largely uninterested in the processes of religious conservatism or reform - another strange trait for a career priest. Throughout the novel, Jack tries to convince Will to invest a huge amount of money in developing a new retirement community. Jack frequently suggests that such an expenditure would meet with Marion's approval. Jack is portrayed as oblivious to the specific concerns and problems of others because he is too focused on the general concepts of being humane to the masses. For example, while talking to Will about making a large donation, he does not notice that Will is hiding a pistol under his leg with which he is contemplating using to commit suicide. Jack marries Leslie and Jason Cupp and later encourages Leslie to assume control of Will's estate.

## Lewis Peckham

Lewis is a golf professional and good friend of Will. Lewis is a complex character in the novel - he is a veteran of military service, obtained an English degree and taught English for several years, and worked in various businesses for several years. Lewis owns a large cave complex and, for several years, conducted tours through it as a concession. Lewis writes bad poetry but thinks it is great poetry, and he takes golf very seriously. Lewis lives near Will and considers Will to be one of his closest friends. Lewis is an atheist and likes to hunt, drink, and watch sporting events. Lewis is unusual because he is both complicated and detailed, yet essentially remains a minor character in the novel.

## Sarah Goodman ("Cheryl Lee")

Sarah is an erotic film actress whose screen name is Cheryl Lee. Although she does not actually appear in the novel, she is discussed in some detail. She is the daughter of Sol Goodman, and both are Jews. She plays violins and stars in *Foxy Frolics*, a film being promoted by Ewell McBee. Sarah wants to make money doing sex films so she can complete college and buy a big house somewhere in the local area. Ewell arranges for Sarah to have sex with Will, but Will does not agree. Sarah is a minor but amusing character in the novel.



## **Dr. Sutter Vaught**

Sutter is Kitty Vaught's brother and is an old and close friend of Will Barrett. During the novel, Sutter works at a Veteran's Administration Medical Center in Santa Fe and spends most of his free time watching television. Will considers Sutter to be very wise and to know many of the secrets of life - whether this is true or not is not ascertained in the novel. Will chooses Sutter to help him conduct his investigation into the reality of God by sending him a rambling and somewhat incoherent letter with strange instructions. Will is sure that Sutter will carry out the instructions because of Sutter's essentially perverse nature - the request is too eccentric for Sutter to ignore. Sutter is a compelling but minor character in the novel.

## **Father Weatherbee**

Father Weatherbee is an old retired priest who lives in a convalescent home and spends his days in the capacious attic occupied with an extensive hobby train set. Jack Curl filled Weatherbee's vacated ecclesiastical position. Will Barrett asks Weatherbee to perform a wedding ceremony and insists when Weatherbee tries to decline. Weatherbee, although somewhat mentally confused, seems to elucidate to Will the meaning of existence. Weatherbee is a pivotal but minor character in the novel.



## Objects/Places

### Will's Luger

Will Barrett owns a Luger semi-automatic pistol - a 9mm handgun used by the Germans in both World War I and World War II. Will obtained the gun from his father who took it from a Nazi Colonel during his military service in World War II. The gun is apparently complete with holster that would make it quite a valuable collector's item. During the early parts of the novel, Will is intensely drawn to the Luger - and treats it as nearly a fetish. He takes it with him to inappropriate places and fires it from the side of the road so he can smell it. When the novel opens, Will has determined to kill himself with the Luger, but he later forgets about this plan. The Luger, a Nazi side-arm, is symbolic of Will's father's view on life.

### Will's W. W. Greener

Will owns a cased antique 12-gauge cylinder-bore double shotgun with double triggers, manufactured by W. W. Greener. Due to a defect in the firing mechanism, both barrels can be discharged simultaneously by pulling on both triggers at the same time. The gun originally belonged to Will's grandfather, then to Will's father. In today's market, the gun would be worth many thousands of dollars as a collector's item. Will's father used the gun to shoot, presumably by accident, Will and then himself on one hunting trip, although both characters survived. Will's father later committed suicide with the gun and, when the sheriff returned it, Will cleaned and oiled the gun for storage. Will retains the cased gun throughout his life and it, along with his Luger, are two of the only objects that Will values. At the conclusion of the novel, however, Will abandons his suicidal impulse and symbolizes his newfound freedom by throwing the shotgun and the pistol away.

### Will's Sterlingworth

As a child, Will Barrett owned and used a Sterlingworth shotgun. He was carrying the Sterlingworth on the day his father shot him. Although Will has retained his father's W. W. Greener, he did not retain his own Sterlingworth. The two guns, Will's Sterlingworth and his W. W. Greener, are symbolic mainly as the distinction between Will as a child and Will as an adult.

### Allison's Greenhouse

Allison inherits a large country estate, which borders the Linwood golf course. At one time the estate had several houses, but they burned down years ago. Now the estate features only a single structure - a large and ornate greenhouse. When Allison moves onto her estate, she lives in the greenhouse, which she cleans and repairs. The



greenhouse is build along a ridge and features a cut shaft that descends to a cave. The shaft circulates air that helps the greenhouse retain a constant year-round temperature.

## **Allison's Cookstove**

Allison finds an old stove in the hidden basement of one of the burned houses on her estate. The stove is massive and ornate. Allison uses block and tackle to hoist the stove from the basement, then disassembles it, cleans the pieces, and reassembles it inside the greenhouse. She considers the stove in minute detail and its construction and use feature prominently in the novel.

## **Allison's Block and Tackle**

Allison purchases a block and tackle and uses them to extract an enormous stove from an abandoned basement. She thereafter uses the block and tackle to hoist an unconscious Will into bed. The block and tackle convince Allison she can accomplish anything she sets her mind to, and they are symbolic of Allison's ability to function independently in the world.

## **Valleyhead Sanatorium**

Valleyhead Sanatorium is the mental hospital where Allison receives electroconvulsive therapy. The sanatorium is apparently located at a fairly secure location, and patients are held without personal consent. Allison lives there for several months but eventually escapes. Allison's mother, Kitty, wants Allison forcibly returned to the sanatorium.

## **Lost Cove Cave**

Lost Cove cave is a cave network with several extensive shafts running through the mountain. Lewis Peckham owns it and the major opening is near his home. Other openings are near the Linwood golf course and one cut shaft emerges in Allison's greenhouse, near the ceiling. Will decides to test the nature of divinity by starving to death within Lost Cove Cave - but is prevented from doing so by a toothache. The cave is the setting for some of the novel's significant character development.

## **Electroconvulsive Therapy ("ECT")**

Electroconvulsive therapy is a controversial psychiatric shock therapy that uses the induction of a seizure in patients by passing electricity through the brain. The action of ECT is unknown but severely disturbed patients are said to exhibit dramatic short-term improvements after therapy. ECT was introduced in the early 1930s and was subsequently used to treat a variety of mood disorders. Today ECT is generally portrayed negatively and has fallen into disuse because of the availability of effective

drug therapies. Allison receives ECT therapy at Valleyhead Sanatorium where the usual course consists of thirty or more treatments repeated at intervals.

## **Linwood, North Carolina**

Linwood is a city in central North Carolina roughly between Raleigh and Charlotte. Linwood is the principle setting of the novel and is portrayed as an intensely Christian and very affluent area. Will Barrett owns a large Linwood home, as do Dr. Vance Battle, Lewis Peckham, and other characters. Rev. Jack Curl's church is in Linwood, and Allison Huger's greenhouse is also in the city.

## Social Sensitivity

In *The Second Coming*, as in many of his novels, Percy is more concerned with the attempts of two individuals to overcome their personal alienation from themselves, from others, and from God, than with their attempts to overcome their alienation from society. But these attempts are interrelated, and, in *The Second Coming*, Percy makes his clearest statement of the traditional belief that marriage is the basic social unit. At the end of the novel, Will and Allison have, to some extent, overcome their alienation, are preparing to marry, and, significantly, are planning to help others build a community.

The novel is also a satiric attack on Christendom. Percy comments that his central character "lives in the most Christian nation in the world, in the most Christian part of that nation, the south, in the most Christian state in the south, North Carolina, in the most Christian town in North Carolina." Yet the people live in a "death-in-life" trance of greed, lust, and hate. Will's Pentecostal daughter and Jack Curl, the Episcopal priest who wears jump suits and is uncomfortable with "religious talk," are particular targets of Percy's satire.



## Techniques

The novel begins with a chapter on Will, then one on Allison. Chapters alternate, occasionally linked very directly: one chapter ends, "He remembered everything" and the next begins, "She remembered nothing." The novel seems to conspire to bring these two lovers together, using coincidences that strain credibility (for example, it turns out that Allison is the daughter of Kitty Vaught, Will's girlfriend in *The Last Gentleman*). Percy may have intended to make a point with this string of coincidences; in a similar way, *The Last Gentleman* seems to conspire to baptize Jamie, whether he likes it or not. However, critics have complained that this technique and the unabashedly optimistic ending makes the novel overly sentimental.



# Themes

## Themes

Love — both human and divine — is a constant theme in Percy's novels, but in *The Second Coming*, Percy provides his most thorough analysis of love and marriage as a way through the alienation of the fallen world. Will Barrett, the central character, consciously (and comically) searches for God, or at least a sign of God, in this novel, but, instead of finding Him, he literally "falls" into love with a woman named Allison. Will and Allison are both alienated, which is to say "fallen" human beings, but by coming together they find a way back to their true selves and each other: "She was moving against him, enclosing him, wrapping her arms and legs around him, as if her body had at last found the center of itself outside itself." Their love is described in allegorical language that recalls both the Christian doctrine of the Fall and the neo-Platonism of Dante: He is a "faller" and she is a "hoister," but Percy is also simple, direct, colloquial: "His need of her was as simple and urgent as drawing the next breath."

Their love is sexual, but it is also sacramental. At the conclusion of the novel, Will asks for a sacramental (in this case, interestingly enough, Episcopal) marriage. In the traditions of the Catholic church, the sacrament of marriage is not complete until it is consummated, and, in the allegorical tradition of the Church, the physical act of intercourse is taken as a symbol of the hypostatic union of the human and the divine. It is in that context that Percy can have Will say, at the conclusion of the novel, as he looks at the priest: "Is she a gift and therefore a sign of a giver? Could it be that the Lord is here, masquerading behind this simple holy face? Am I crazy to want both, her and Him? No, not want must have. And will have." This is the most profoundly optimistic conclusion that Percy ever wrote: Will Barrett has found both love and the sign he had searched for so desperately.

## Love is Redeeming

Will Barrett is suicidal and has decided that life is senseless and farcical. He remembers his father's suicide and comes to believe that, after all, his father was right - life is essentially meaningless. Will's deep depression stands in marked contrast to his affluent circumstances full of everything that could seemingly be desired. Even though Will enjoys an extensive network of friends and associates, he finds life to be incomplete and useless. Allison Huger is young, talented, and capable. She has just inherited an estate worth millions of dollars, allowing her to pursue any activity in life that she prefers. She owns a greenhouse that gives her personal satisfaction, and she has survived involuntary commitment to an asylum. Nevertheless, she suffers from a severe mental condition and finds herself slipping downward into what she describes as a dark silent place.





Both of these characters are mirrored by dozens of other minor characters in the novel. Ewell McBee and Lewis Peckham, for example, are two of Will's friends who live seemingly pointless and unfulfilling lives. Ewell is determined to make his fortune by peddling pornography and Lewis, affluent, famous, and athletic, often can think of nothing better to do than drink and play records. Will's daughter Leslie is young and in love and should be riding a spiritual high but instead is focused on her anger and argues ceaselessly about the impropriety of formal organized religion. Will's convalescent home is packed with strange characters crippled and destroyed by life and any absence of meaning.

Then Will meets Allison, the two protagonists fall in love, and everything changes for them. Will's determination of suicide simply evaporates - he meets his dark impulse and rejects it. Allison stops circling the dark center of her mind and looks outward with joy and exuberance. Within just a few days, the characters undergo an amazing metamorphosis and begin to look forward to a bright and positive future. Their love then begins to ripple outward and encompass others as they offer hope and meaning to several of the crippled inhabitants of the convalescent home. The narrative positions love as the only credible redemption from a living death.

## God Says "Maybe"

One of the central preoccupations of the novel is the existence of God. Will's deceased wife was committed to a Christian life and eagerly participated in organized religion. Will's daughter and son-in-law espouse "born-again" Christianity and, though they denigrate organized religion, they accept the saving grace of Jesus as the guiding principle in their lives. Will ponders ceaselessly on the existence of God and knows who does and who does not believe in God.

Will finally concludes that he will commit suicide - or attempt to - in a way that will conclusively settle whether God exists. Will's plan envisions posing a question that allows for only two possible answers - Yes or No. This way, God cannot avoid a direct answer and Will's death will have an intrinsic meaning. Will hides himself in a cave with a handful of sleeping pills. His plan is to take pills, sleep, wake up, and then pray for a manifestation. Failing a manifestation, Will plans to take more pills and repeat the process until he starves to death. If God manifests, then Will will have learned conclusively that God lives and his knowledge will trump any wavering faith. If God does not manifest, then Will will have learned that either God does not exist or that God does not actively participate in human affairs which, to Will, is functionally equivalent to God's non-existence.

As can be expected, God does not answer Will's question with a Yes or a No, but with a Maybe. Will starves for seven or eight days without notable progress. He then develops a toothache and begins to suffer from extreme nausea. The pain drives him to abandon his determined quest and he crawls around in the cave, lost, until he accidentally falls out of a shaft and blacks out. When he comes to, he discovers he has been rescued by Allison who nurses him back to health. It is notable that Will's horrible toothache simply



vanishes - he never thinks of it again and it never troubles him again. Will never reflects that his strangely transient toothache may, perhaps, have been his sign - even if it was a muddy maybe.

## The Living Death

Will's father was an exuberant, unrestrained, and highly emotional man. After a life full of conflict and confrontation, he committed suicide. Prior to his death, he performed a sort of trial-run suicide which Will views throughout the novel as a sort of educational experience. After Will's wife's death, Will begins to feel that life is farcical and senseless. He comes to several conclusions that evolve throughout the narrative but can be generalized into three essential conditions. Will believes that simple life is a form of tormented endless dying - as there is no purpose in normal life, it is a form of death. Of course, one must remember that Will is depressed.

The second form of life is referred to as "life through death" and, for Will, this is epitomized by the carnage and bloodshed of World War II which is symbolized by the Luger pistol his father took from a captured Nazi. Thus, warfare can be viewed as an essential cause that is self-justifying and therefore validates life. Although Will does not predominantly focus on this aspect of existence, his father, a combat veteran, did. Therefore, Will's father's preoccupation with hunting, emotional outbursts, and physical domination are intelligible because they connected him to life through death. Will holds this opinion predominantly because his father instilled it upon him as the only valid alternative to the living death.

Both of these viewpoints are untenable over the long term and Will comes to realize this. Thus, he plans suicide as did his father. Will senses, however, that his father's suicide was nearly pointless - educational perhaps, but nevertheless needless. Will believes that he, too, will commit suicide to escape the living death. Will then deludes himself into thinking that he can construct a suicide that will be inherently meaningful and even attempts to complete his task although he is unsuccessful.

The novel concludes when Will discovers a third alternative. He can abandon his living death and life through a death dichotomy by embracing a third alternative - an existential philosophy of life through created meaning. Thus, Will's subjective experiences with Allison can be seen as significant - so significant, in fact, that Will is able to accept them as the actual reason for living. He thereafter positions his subjective experiences as a valid alternative to his father's objective living death.



# Style

## Point of View

The novel is written in the first person omniscient point of view; as early as page 9 the narrator refers to him or herself as "I" in a metafictional construction. The unnamed, unknown narrator is authoritative, consistent, and reliable. The first person narrator, however, is completely effaced by the text and does not occur as a significant character or participant in the events described in the novel. Strangely and enjoyably, the narrator also does not intrude in the narrative construction. This causes the text to be read as if it were constructed from a more traditional third person point of view even as infrequent and subtle but notable intrusions of the first person narrator occur.

The narrator is completely omniscient and routinely exposes the inner thoughts and desires of Will Barrett and Allison Huger. The narrator is also familiar with all aspects of the protagonists' lives both throughout the novel's primary timeline and before. Thus, events in the childhood of Will and Allison are relayed in the same efficient, cool, and omniscient way as are observable actions within the narrative timeline.

This unusual narrative technique allows the novel to present itself as a story between friends about valued acquaintances. The emotional distance that often exists in third person narratives is eliminated but the unreliable first person viewpoint so common in first person narratives is negated. The first person narrator is able to treat events and characterizations in a fair and objective manner and events are therefore engaging and believable.

## Setting

The novel is set in Linwood, North Carolina, an actual city in the central portion of that state. In the novel, wooded mountains with beautiful vistas dominate the area. The novels' characters are, generally, extremely affluent and own large private estates that span many dozens or hundreds of acres of the pristine forest that surrounds relatively isolated mansions. The city is described as a typically Southern urban center with dispersed outlying suburbs and private estates. The city has at least one hardware store, a hotel, a golf course, several churches, and a retirement community. Additional urban areas are implied by the presence of police, traffic, and congestion. The city attracts many transient visitors who walk, bike, or hike through the area.

Within the city are several smaller areas that are further developed as major settings. Much of the action takes place on the Linwood golf course where most of the novel's characters enjoy rounds of golf and hold lengthy discussions ranging from everyday living to metaphysical debates. The golf course is bordered by forest and on one side by a large stony ridge. Near the ridge, a small fissure leads down through a twisting passage until a larger network of caves opens up.



Another principle setting is an old decorated greenhouse, built against the ridge that parallels a portion of the golf course. The greenhouse was at one time part of a serious of buildings on a large estate. The other buildings were destroyed in a fire, however, and the greenhouse remains as the solitary building. The greenhouse was purposely built against the ridge so that it could be connected to the cave system by a cut passageway that allows cave air to circulate through the greenhouse. This allows the cave's constant temperature to moderate the greenhouse's temperature keeping it cool in the summer and warm in the winter.

The final setting of much of the novel is a convalescent home located near the golf course. The home was established with a donation provided by Will's deceased wife Marion, and its continued operation relies on cash infusions from Will's significant monetary resources. During the novel, Will encounters many characters living in the home and, at the end of the novel, Will is moved into the home by his daughter Leslie. The convalescent home is a typical old folks' home and houses numerous interesting minor characters.

## Language and Meaning

The novel uses very complex and subtle language that creates extensive meaning beyond the actual grammatical construction. For example, the title "The Second Coming" carries several related meanings. It is, of course, an allusion to the anticipated second coming of Christ, an event that consumes much of Will Barrett's thoughts in the initial chapters of the novel. It is also a reference to the second appearance of Will Barrett as a character in Percy's novel (he appeared in Percy's earlier *The Last Gentleman*). It also alludes to Will's second major relationship during his life, after Marion, and to Allison's second relationship, after Sarge. It can also be seen as a metaphoric representation of Will and Allison's changed outlook on life. Finally, an analysis of the word "come" within the text will reveal a markedly complex and rich conceptualization of the various ways one can "come," from the merely sexual or physical to the existential.

Within the text, meaning is constructed as both subjective and objective. Some of the characters - for example the doctors and the lawyers - view meaning as essentially objective. Will is mentally ill because of a pH imbalance that must be monitored and treated. They do not view Will's fugues as rich subjective experiences full of personal meaning, but as aberrations of thought caused by a disease process that must be controlled. Allison's bipolar behavior should be treated by electroconvulsive therapy. Will's golf slice should be analyzed and corrected.

Other characters, however, view meaning as essentially subjective. For example, Cheryl Lee is an erotic actress. Ewell McBee finds her objectively interesting because she is presumably sexy, young, and sexually available. Will Barrett also finds her interesting - subjectively - because she happens to be a Jew living in North Carolina without plans to emigrate from the State. Thus, the introduction of this minor pornographic film actress creates at least two widely disparate meanings within the narrative. One of the most

intriguing aspects of the novel is, in fact, the gradual shift in subjective meaning that happens to various events as the principle protagonists evolve as characters.

## Structure

The 360-page novel is divided into two parts, each of which is divided into chapters of unequal length, ranging from a brief eight pages up to 78 pages. Part 1 includes seven chapters and Part 2 includes five chapters. All but three chapters are further sub-divided into numbered sections. Chapters therefore contain from one to nine sections. In Part 1, the principle character of each chapter switches between Will Barrett and Allison Huger. In Part 2, after the characters have developed a relationship, the chapters often focus on both characters simultaneously. In Part 1, four chapters and roughly 150 pages focus on Will, while three chapters and about 70 pages focus on Allison.

The novel's chapters are arranged in a largely chronological format although several of the opening chapters are understood to take place simultaneously. That is to say, events happening to Will transpire roughly simultaneously with events elsewhere happening to Allison. Given this relatively straightforward approach to chronology, the novel develops a quite intricate series of events that occur outside of the narrative's principle timeline. These events usually occur as flashbacks or as remembered events.

The division of the novel into two parts creates structure that allows the two primary characters to exist first as individuals and later as a committed couple. Within each part, the chapters describe discreet events or occasions. Within the chapters, each section, if present, is generally devoted to an identifiable topic or component of the chapter. The novels' divisions are therefore useful and allow easy accessibility to the text. Finally, it is worth noting that the novel is typically considered a sequel to Percy's earlier *The Last Gentleman*.



## Quotes

"Lately he remembered everything. His symptom, if it was a symptom, as the opposite of amnesia, a condition as far as I know unnamed by medical science." (Part 1, Chapter 1, Section 1, p. 9)

"Date: October 15

"Place: Room 212, Closed Wing, Valleyhead Sanatorium

"Below, printed in capital letters and underlined, was the following:

"instructions from myself to myself

"What followed was written in her ordinary script:

"As I write this to you, I don't remember everything but I remember more than you will remember when you read this. You remember nothing now, do you? I know this from experience. Electroshock knocks out memory for a while. I don't feel bad. To tell you the truth, I'm not even sure I'm sick. But they think I'm worse because I refuse to talk in group (because there is nothing to say) and won't eat with the others, preferring to sit under the table (because a circle of knees is more interesting than a circle of faces)." (Part 1, Chapter 2, p. 27)

"He gave her the book. My God, what a nutty world, she zonked out on something, reading Rafael Sabatini and holed up alone in a ruined greenhouse, while grown middle-aged men socked little balls around a mountain meadow and hummed along in electric carts telling jokes about Jews and Germans and niggers. Atlanta and Carolina invaded by Arabs. No wonder my father wanted out." (Part 1, Chapter 3, Section 3, p. 77)

"Dr. Duk's plan: I think yall are overlooking one little thing. Both plans are excellent. But the fact remains that Allison is not quite herself yet - though she is clearly making progress, progress toward a decision to have something to do with us. My own feeling about Allison is that she knows a great deal more than she lets on. Right, Allison?

"*Wraing.*

"You see, said Dr. Duk. What she said was halfway between *right* and *wrong*. She's afraid to commit herself. My own wish is that she have a final little refresher course of treatment.

"I don't think she needs any more shock treatments, said her mother. There's nothing wrong with Allison except that she's an extremely sensitive person who is more subject to tension than most people. So am I! Tension! That's the enemy. She gets wound up just like me. You know what I do? Stretch out and tell my toes to relax, then my knees - they do it!



"You want to know what I think it all comes down to, said her father to the world around, looking at no one in particular. It all comes down to accepting your responsibility. Once you do that, you got it made.

"Shape up or ship out, she thought. Right. I'm shipping out.

"This little refresher course is my own contribution, said Dr. Duk. I'm reading a little paper on it in San Francisco. My finding is that a refresher course of six treatments in selected cases is even more effective than the usual thirty.

"*No buzzin cousin*. It was her voice but it sounded like a radio with a bad volume control.

"They all looked at her.

"She herself will tell you, said Dr. Duk, that after receiving my own modified ECT, she feels better, relates better to people and her environment, speaks freely, eats better, sleeps better.

"*Fried is crucified*, said the radio.

"They all looked at Dr. Duk, she too.

"Dr. Duk smiled down at his little Dead-Sea-scroll Marlboro. Allison is giving us her own theory of why ECT works - which is as good as any, to tell you the truth. Namely that going through the ordeal of ECT is a kind of expiation for guilt. Having expiated, one naturally feels better." (Part 1, Chapter 4, Section 2, pp. 103-104)

"He hefted the Luger. His father took it off an SS colonel, it and the colonel's black cap with its Totenkopf insignia and some photographs - his father: a captain in the 10th Armored Division, which joined Patton at Saarburg, where he, his father, had pictures taken standing up in the hatch of an M4 Sherman tank, which did not look at all like the snapshot in the Ardennes (even though I somehow know it was exactly what he, my father, had in mind when he had this picture taken: the Tiger in all its menacing beauty). Strange that he, my father, often spoke of the Ardennes and the Rhine and Weimar but never mentioned Buchenwald, which was only four miles from Weimar and which Patton took three weeks later, never mentioned that the horrified Patton paraded fifteen hundred of Weimar's best humanistic Germans right down the middle of Buchenwald to see the sights, Patton of all people, no Goethe he who said to the fifteen hundred not look you sons of Goethe but look you sons of bitches (is not this in fact, Father, where your humanism ends in the end?). Yet he, my father, never mentioned that, even though I read about it in his own book, a history of the Third Army, that the 10th Armored Division was there too. Why did he keep the photographs of the SS colonel standing in the hatch of the Tiger tank which I found in the attic in Mississippi and not one word about Buchenwald? Why did he talk about the SS colonel so much if the Nazis were so bad and why did he think Patton not the SS colonel ridiculous with his chrome helmet and pearl-handled revolvers?" (Part 1, Chapter 5, Section 1, pp. 132-133)



"So it was that Will Barrett went mad. His peculiar delusion and the strange pass it brought him to would be comical if it were not so perilous. This unfortunate man, long subject to 'spells,' 'petty-mall' trances, and such minor disorders, had now gone properly crazy. This is how crazy he was. He had become convinced that the Last Days were at hand, that the world had fallen into the hands of the only species which knew how to destroy itself along with all other living creatures on earth, that whenever in history this species had invented a weapon, it had forthwith used it; that it was characteristic of this species that, through a perversity or an upsidedownness peculiar to it, while professing a love of peace and freedom and life, secretly it loved war and thralldom and death and loved them to a degree that it, the species, in these last days behaved like creatures possessed by demons; that the end would come by fire, a fire such as had not been seen in all of history until this century of demons, a fire which would consume the earth. The very persons who spoke most about 'people's democracy' or 'the freedom and sacredness of the individual' were the most likely, he was convinced, to be possessed by demons.

"Madness! Madness! Madness! Yet such was the nature of Will Barrett's peculiar delusion when he left his comfortable home atop a pleasant Carolina mountain and set for on the strangest adventure of his life, descended into Lost Cove cave looking for proof of the existence of God and a sign of the apocalypse like some crackpot preacher in California." (Part 1, Chapter 5, Section 9, pp. 197-198)

"What a stove! It was a castle of a stove, a rambling palace of a stove, a cathedral of a stove, with spires and turrets and battlements. A good six feet high and eight feet wide, it was made of heavily nickeled iron castings bolted together. Timidly she rubbed the metal with one finger. It was dirty but not rusty. Panels of porcelain enamel, turquoise blue for the oven doors and the four warming closets, little balconies jutting out head-high, snowy white for the splashback, were fused to heavy cast iron between frames of nickel. Bolted on one side was a nickel-iron box lined with heavy copper and fitted with a spigot. A water reservoir! On the other side, the firebox with a bay window of a door glazed with panes of mica, some crazed, some crystallized, but all intact. She opened the fire door. Inside was a grate, barely used to judge from the blacking, evidently a coal grate with four sides curling up like heavy petals, but observe: the end grates were attached by a single bolt and easily removable to accommodate logs, three-foot logs! Behind the firebox and attached by a short drawbridge loomed a squat Romanesque tower, yet another heater, in turn with an ornamental temperature indicator (unbroken!). What was this? a newfangled 1899 water heater? (No, there was the copper reservoir which heated from the firebox.) A dining room? With a flue arrangement served by the main firebox so that, except in very cold weather, the two rooms could be heated from the same firebox? She would see." (Part 1, Chapter 6, pp. 203-204)

"Unfortunately for the poor man awaiting the Last Days and raving away at God and man in the bowels of Sourwood Mountain directly below thousands of normal folk playing golf and antiquing and barbecuing and simply enjoying the fall colors - for on the following day at the height of his lunacy the cloud blew away and the beautiful days of Indian summer began, the mountains glowed like rubies and amethysts, and leafers were out in force - unfortunately things can go wrong with an experiment most carefully





designed by a sane scientist. A clear yes or no answer may not be forthcoming, after all. The answer may be a muddy maybe. In the case of Will Barrett, what went wrong could hardly be traced to God or man, Jews or whomever, but rather to a cause at once humiliating and comical: a toothache. So in the end not only did he not get a clear answer to his peculiar question, not a yes or a no or even a maybe - he could not even ask the question. How does one ask a question, either a profound question or a lunatic question, with such a pain in the upper canine that every heartbeat feels like a hot ice pick shoved straight up into the brain? The toothache was so bad it made him sick. He vomited.

"There is one sure cure for cosmic explorations, grandiose ideas about God, man, death suicide, and such - and that is nausea. I defy a man afflicted with nausea to give a single thought to these vast subjects. A nauseated man is a sober man. A nauseated man is a disinterested man.

"What does a nauseated person care about the Last Days?

"Whether it was God's doing or ordinary mortal frailty, one cannot be sure. What happened in any event, happened after seven or eight days." (Part 1, Chapter 7, p. 213)

"She frowned and folded her arms. 'He went down into Lost Cove cave, got lost, came back up, and fell into my place.'

"Though it was true, it sounded odd, even to her.

"'Fell?' he said.

"'That's what I said. Fell. Flat fell down into my place.'

"'He fell into your place from a cave,' said the doctor.

"'That's right.'

"The doctor nodded. 'Okay.' Then he shook his head. 'He shouldn't be doing that.'

"'Doing what?'

"'He doesn't take care of himself. With his brain lesion he won't - ' His eyes opened. 'All right. This is as good a chance as any to throw him down and look at him. Where is your place?'

"'You know the old Kemp place.'

"'There's nothing left there.'

"'A greenhouse is left.'

"'You live in the greenhouse?'



"'Yes.'

"'Will is staying in your greenhouse?'

"'Yes. He fell into the greenhouse from the cave.'

"'He fell into your greenhouse. From the cave. Okay.'

"It pleased her that Dr. Vance Battle did not seem to find it remarkable that the two of them, who? Will and who? Allie, Will and Allie, should be staying in the greenhouse. Only once did he cock his head and look at her along his cheekbones. Will and Allie? Williston and Allison? Willie and Allie?

"'It is a matter in confidence,' she said. In confidence? Of confidence? To be held in confidence? Her rehearsed language had run out. She didn't know where to put *ofs* and *ins*. It was time to leave.

"'Right. Tell that rascal I'll be out this afternoon. We'll throw him down and have a look at him.'

"Right, she repeated to herself and left. I will tell that rascal." (Part 2, Chapter 1, Section 4, p. 250)

"'I'm afraid Dr. Battle is doing himself an injustice,' said Dr. Ellis dryly, his eyes drifting along the X-rays. He saw that Dr. Ellis had a way of feigning inattention which in fact allowed him to pay strict attention. 'He suggested all along that you had a petit-mal epilepsy, which in fact you do, a rare form, so rare it bears the name of its discoverer. It's called Hausmann's Syndrome. It is in fact a petit-mal temporal-lobe epilepsy which is characterized by typical symptoms. It is not too well controlled by Dilantin but there's a new drug which works very well. That is to say, it clears up the symptoms. What we have to do is rule out a lesion in the temporal lobe. Dr. Battle favors that. I don't. The odd thing about the treatment is - '

"'What are the symptoms?' asked Will Barrett.

"Dr. Ellis shrugged, 'As I recalled, Dr. Hausmann listed such items as depression, fugues, certain delusions, sexual dysfunction alternating between impotence and satyriasis, hypertension, and what he called *wahnsinnige Sehnsucht* - I rather like that. It means inappropriate longing.'" (Part 2, Chapter 3, Section 4, p. 302)

"'You'll do just fine. And we're not exactly spring chickens ourselves.' She softened and gave him a different kind of poke in the ribs. 'When you feel better, come take me for a ride. No, I'll take you. We'll park at the golf course and you can hug me up, remember?'

"'Remember what?'

"'Hugging me up on the golf course.'



"Ah - no.'

"He looked at his watch. If he could get away from Kitty, there was time to catch the beginning of the Morning Movie, which this morning was King Solomon's Mines, which was no great movie, true, but whose beginning, with Deborah Kerr and a saturnine Allan Quartermain played by Stewart Granger, he savored somewhat nevertheless. Deborah was trying to talk him into helping her find her husband in a remote unexplored country." (Part 2, Chapter 4, Section 5, p. 322)

"'Oh dear,' said Father Weatherbee and, sinking in his chair, appeared to be muttering to himself. He looked around vaguely and spoke so softly that Will Barrett had to cup his good ear. 'It seems I understand simple foreign folk better than my own people. It seems I understand every country in the world better than my own country.' He craned up his neck like a Philippine bird and looked in every direction except Will Barrett's. 'How can we be the best dearest most generous people on earth, and at the same time so unhappy? How harsh everyone is here! How restless! How impatient! How worried! How sarcastic! How unhappy! How hateful! How pleasure-loving! How lascivious! Above all, how selfish! Why is it that we have more than any other people, are more generous with what we have, and yet are so selfish and unhappy? Why do we think of nothing but our own pleasure? I cannot believe my eyes at what I see on television. It makes me blush with shame. Did you know that pleasure-seeking leads to cruelty? That is why more and more people beat their children. Children interfere with pleasure. Do you hate children? Why can't we be grateful for our great blessings and thank God?' As he gazed down at the desk, he seemed to have forgotten Will Barrett. His voice sank to a whisper. 'Why is it that Americans who are the best dearest most generous people on earth are so unhappy?' He shook his head. 'I don't - '

"'Yes! Right!' said Will Barrett excitedly and leaned even closer. 'That is why I say it is so important to recognize a sign when you - '" (Part 2, Chapter 5, Section 12, pp. 358-359)



## Topics for Discussion

Consider the title of the novel - "The Second Coming;" to what does it refer?

Do you think that electroconvulsive therapy helped Allison's recovery? Do you think it hindered her recovery?

The novel presents an incredible number of minor characters from Kelso to Mr. Arnold. Small details of many of these characters are noted and many of them stand out as distinct individuals. Of the various minor characters in the novel, which do you find to be the most interesting?

Will is diagnosed with Hausmann's Syndrome, a type of epilepsy caused by a pH imbalance in the body. Do you think that Hausmann's Syndrome is a fictional condition or a real medical condition?

Will crashes his Mercedes by driving it off the road and over a cliff where it lands in a tree, suspended above the ground. Just a few days later, he again drives his Mercedes and notes that it is functioning better than ever. How do you think this mechanical miracle occurred?

A toothache interrupts Will's planned suicide in Lost Cove cave. Yet, when Will emerges from the cave the toothache has vanished and never occurs again. Do you think that Will's transient toothache was a manifestation of God that Will simply failed to notice?

Compare the discussions that Allison has with Will to the discussions that she has with other characters in the novel. With whom does Allison actually communicate?

Will has a sexual relationship with Kitty Huger and, decades later, has a sexual relationship with Kitty's daughter. Is the novel simply the sex fantasy of an aging author? On the other hand, does the disparate age serve a distinctive purpose within the narrative? Can Allison be viewed as Will's second chance to reclaim his youth?

Allison is afraid of being watched. When she is alone she is capable of nearly anything, but when she is observed she is nearly petrified with anxiety. Is this a normal reaction?

Of all of the characters in the novel, whom do you consider the "most crazy?"

## Literary Precedents

The Second Coming, in providing a concrete, physical situation for philosophical and theological concerns, follows Percy's general approach, borrowed from the French existentialists.

Again, much of the philosophical framework is provided by Kierkegaard, although the theme of love as a redemptive power is certainly related to neo-Platonic thought, as seen in Dante's *Divine Comedy*, and the action of the novel is a reworking of the Christian myth of the Fall. A subplot — Will's attempt to come to terms with the suicide of his father, and his realization that his father had intended to kill him — is handled in a Faulknerian way, even though Percy is one of the few modern southern writers who was not strongly influenced by Faulkner.

## Related Titles

The most obviously related novel is *The Last Gentleman*, in which a younger, more confused Will is the central character. This Will Barrett has made a fortune as a lawyer in New York, has married into an even larger fortune, and has retired early. Percy's point is that Will's metaphysical problems are certainly not related to an inability to deal successfully with the world.

Also, even though *The Second Coming* is a more thorough consideration of the redemptive power of love and marriage, the optimism of this conclusion recalls a similar joyous conclusion to *Love in the Ruins* (1971): "To bed we go for a long winter's nap, twined about each other as the ivy twineth, not under a bush or in a car or on the floor or any such humbug as marked the past peculiar years of Christendom, but at home in bed where all good folk belong."



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