Sometimes a Great Notion Study Guide

Sometimes a Great Notion by Ken Kesey

The following sections of this BookRags Literature Study Guide is offprint from Gale's For Students Series: Presenting Analysis, Context, and Criticism on Commonly Studied Works: Introduction, Author Biography, Plot Summary, Characters, Themes, Style, Historical Context, Critical Overview, Criticism and Critical Essays, Media Adaptations, Topics for Further Study, Compare & Contrast, What Do I Read Next?, For Further Study, and Sources.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites".

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults: "About the Author", "Overview", "Setting", "Literary Qualities", "Social Sensitivity", "Topics for Discussion", "Ideas for Reports and Papers".

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Plot Summary

This innovative novel tells the multi-generational story of the Stampers, a lumber family in Oregon. Throughout the novel, tension-filled relationships within the family are echoed by the relationship the family has with a nearby town and its citizens, most of whom harbor generations-old resentments of the Stampers. More important than the novel's substance, however, is its style. Narrative voice and perspective shifts frequently between time periods and between characters, creating the thematically-relevant sense that there is no core truth, only interpretations of events.

The novel begins with a scene of confrontation. Union organizer, Draeger, arrives at the Stamper family home to confront Hank Stamper, who seems to have gone back on a deal he made with the union. After being confronted with a powerful symbol of the Stamper family's contempt, Draeger seeks out Hank's wife, Viv. He finds her in a local bar studying a family photo album. Her comments on some of the photographs it contains trigger a transition into an extended flashback. This makes up the action of most of the novel's remaining chapters.

The story of the Stampers begins with recollections of how the male members of the family have always been restless, moving ever further west until settled in Oregon. Being on the west coast, there was no further they could go. They stayed there and worked their way into the lumber business. Henry Stamper moves into the position of head of the family following his father's return to a family farm in Kansas, takes a young bride, and fathers Henry Junior (Hank). Hank's mother dies; Henry takes another bride, and then fathers Leland (Lee). Tensions between Hank and Lee emerge during their childhood and increase into their adolescence. It culminates in Lee's discovery that Hank is having a sexual relationship with his (Lee's) mother. She takes Lee back east to attend school and never returns home. Lee doesn't see his family for over a dozen years, and his mother commits suicide.

A few months after his mother's death, Lee receives a postcard insisting that he come home and help the family in a time of need. There's a strike in the lumber industry, but the Stampers are scabbing (filling the contracts of the striking workers). They need all the help they can get. Lee returns home with the intention of taking revenge on Hank for what he did to his (Lee's) mother. When he gets there, he discovers a kindred spirit in Viv, Hank's young, sensitive wife. As the increasingly senile Henry, the sullen Hank and the friendly cousin Joe-Bob teach Lee the ropes of the lumber business, Lee develops a relationship with Viv. They eventually see in her a means of taking revenge on Hank. Specifically, he intends upon having an affair with her and destroying the trust in their relationship. The lonely Viv responds to his attentions, but before they can act on their mutual attraction, tragedy strikes. As the family struggles to meet a contract, Joe-Bob is accidentally killed, and Henry loses an arm.

In the aftermath of the accident, Lee and Viv make love, and Hank beats a long-time rival to a bloody pulp. After begging Viv to come back east with him and accepting her refusal, Lee prepares to move. Before he goes, however, Lee and Hank get into a

fistfight on the dock by the house, and surprise each other by battling to a draw. Because of this fight, Lee realizes he can't leave, because that would concede defeat. Viv, however, prepares to leave, takes with her a photo album, and waits in the town bar for the bus to take her out of town. This returns the action to the point at which the first chapter ended.

After saying goodbye to Draeger, Viv catches her bus and leaves town, watching Hank and Lee riding logs on the river as she goes.

Chapter 1

Chapter 1 Summary

This innovative novel tells the multi-generational story of the Stampers, a lumber family in Oregon. Throughout the novel, tension-filled relationships within the family are echoed by the relationship the family has with a nearby town and its citizens, most of whom harbor generations-old resentments of the Stampers. More important than the novel's substance, however, is its style. Narrative voice and perspective shifts frequently between time periods and between characters, creating the thematically-relevant sense that there is no core truth, only interpretations of events.

Each chapter begins with a poetically written prologue. In this chapter, the prologue contains a detailed description of the Old Stamper Place and the unsteady, constantly eroding riverbank upon which it balances. It concludes with a description of a human arm being hung out an upper floor window and a woman's voice shouting the name of Hank Stamper.

Draeger, suffering from the feverish after-effects of a nasty flu bug, drives up to a crowd of men watching the Old Stamper Place and calling out for Hank. He learns from union representative Floyd Evenwrite that after extensive negotiations, Hank has gone back on an agreement and negotiations have to be re-started. Draeger asks whether anyone has communicated with Hank. In response, he is handed a pair of binoculars and told to look at the house to see for himself. Draeger looks through the binoculars, fighting down his feverish unease. He sees that Hank has hung what looks like a human arm from the window, the middle finger of the hand extended in the universal gesture of crude dismissal. Draeger angrily asks where Hank's wife is, and he's directed to a bar in town. Draeger follows the directions and encounters Viv Stamper, who shows him an old photo album that she says she's only now beginning to understand.

The narrative shifts focus at this point, beginning the story of Hank Stamper's family. Narration (including interjections in Hank's voice) recounts how the Stampers have always been restless, unable to stay in one place for very long. They always feel the call to move west. At one point, some members of the family, including Hank's father Jonas, feel they'd had enough wandering and resolve to settle in Kansas. However, even that doesn't last. Jonas leaves with his sons Henry, Ben and Aaron to start life in Oregon. Jonas soon becomes disillusioned, with both the dampness and the crowded-ness of the west coast landscape oppressing him in a way that the dry heat and open-ness of the plains never did. One day he ups and goes back to Kansas, leaving his three sons to run his lumber business and survive for a while on the charity of the rich, greedy Stokes family. One of the Stokes boys, Bobby, is for a while Henry's best friend. However, after he manipulates Henry's mother into selling him their property, their relationship falls apart.

Henry's mother dies, Henry marries a much older woman, and she gives birth to Hank. A few weeks after Hank is born, Henry receives a wall plaque from Jonas carved with an inscription from the Bible ("Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth. Matthew 6"). A note from Jonas expresses the hope that Hank will grow up knowing more charity from his family than he (Jonas) ever did. Henry paints over the quotation in garish red and yellow paint, writing on the plaque his new motto - NEVER GIVE A INCH. An interjection from Hank comments that he never understood how much influence that motto had on his life until he was much older.

When Hank is ten years old, his mother dies. Henry travels to New York to find a new bride, and in spite of his rough appearance and relatively advanced age, he comes back with a beautiful young woman named Myra. They're quickly married, and Myra quickly gives birth to Leland. Just as quickly, she becomes disillusioned with her husband and marriage. Over the next several years, she repeatedly promises herself she's going to leave, but never actually does. There are hints that she and Hank had an ongoing sexual relationship to which Henry was completely blind but Leland (Lee) was not. As Myra is taking Lee to school in back east, Lee and Hank get into a vicious argument about each other's secret bad behavior. There are no indications at this point what, exactly, Lee's bad behavior is. However, as he and Myra sail across the river towards the train station where they will catch their train back east, Lee repeats the phrase "Just you wait" to himself over and over. The indication is he's planning to take revenge on Hank for his affair with Myra. Narration recounts how Lee stayed away for twelve years and came back to the family home. This was only after his uncle Ben sent him a postcard, saying Henry was both old and laid up with injuries, and that the logging company needed him to come home and help put the business back on track.

Chapter 1 Analysis

The prologues to each chapter generally function as metaphoric summaries of the plot to follow and/or the deeper thematic meaning of the action within that plot. The prologue to this chapter functions, to varying degrees, on both those levels. In terms of the plot, the prologue's concluding incident (the appearance of the arm and the woman crying out Hank's name) is in fact an inciting incident for the novel. It triggers Draeger's search for Viv, which, when he finds her, is in turn the trigger for the extended series of flashbacks that make up the main part of the book. In terms of theme, the main point here is the description of the ramshackle, makeshift Stamper house and the uneasy foundation on which it's built. The thematically relevant metaphor here is that all the relationships within the Stamper family are cobbled together in the same way as the house. Where the house is put together from random pieces of wood, brick and mortar, the family is constructed of bits of love, respect, anger, resentment, gratitude, memory, and the desire for revenge.

The uneasy foundations upon which the house is built represent the power and level of control that the senior Stamper men, Henry and Hank, have over the family business and the family. That power, like the earth upon which the house rests, is constantly being eroded and shored up. That power is challenged by external forces, such as the

envy of the town and Lee's ever-deepening resentment, most of which are manipulated and rebuffed in the same way as the erosive forces of the river. This is the first example of the recurring use throughout the novel of water as a symbol, not so much of destructiveness as of randomness and unpredictability. The destructive power of the river is an example of that randomness. The description of the house is another, in that it's described as having been constructed to withstand sudden shifts and changes in the level of water in the river in the same way as the Stamper family is constructed to withstand economic and social conditions of their community.

The first part of this chapter essentially functions as a framing device, book ending with the final part of Chapter 11 to establish a context of events to which the intervening chapters, and the events they portray, give meaning. Important elements of this context include Floyd Evenwrite's evidently long history of confrontation with the Stampers, and Draeger's position as mediator in their most recent dispute. Both elements reappear throughout the main body of the novel, which explains how events got to the point of tension portrayed here. The most important element in this context-defining section is the appearance of the severed arm and it's extended, gesturing finger. This is one of the novel's defining symbols, in that the gesture represents the attitude of almost the entire Stamper family to the town, its rules, and its feelings about them. Additional symbolic values later become clear, when it's revealed that the arm belongs to Henry, the Stamper patriarch. It was severed from the rest of his body by a falling tree. This represents the level of sacrifice the Stamper family is prepared to make in order to maintain its power, as well as the way the lumber business (as represented by the tree) has the potential to destroy the family, if it hasn't already done so.

Another important symbol appears in the second part of the chapter. This is the painted over sign, which represents the way in which the Stamper family values of determination and stubbornness have "painted over" or overwhelmed so-called Biblical values like humility. As this is an American novel and American society is founded on a traditional and almost universal respect for individuality, independence, rule breaking and rebellion, on one level these Stamper family values can be seen as being admirable. They're a manifestation of the so-called "American Dream." Since the novel focuses on the potential for destruction of lives and relationships when those values are pursued in an obsessive and ever-hungrier way, there is the possibility that the novel might also be interpreted as a portrayal of the way the "American Dream" can be corrupted. In any case, the appearance of the painted-over sign here foreshadows the way that Henry, Hank, Lee and the other Stampers operate by the "Never Give an Inch" motto.

The rest of the first chapter is mostly taken up with exposition, defining the family's history and particularly the years-old and long simmering tensions between Hank and Lee. These tensions motivate and define their actions throughout the rest of the novel. In particular, the references to Lee's desire for and determination to take revenge foreshadow his plotting to hurt Hank in whatever way he can.

Chapter 2

Chapter 2 Summary

The prologue for this chapter speaks of a fast talking salesman pitching a device that sounds a lot like a kaleidoscope. Whoever looks into it perceives something other than what he thought he was looking at.

The chapter itself begins with an extended description of how the Oregon coast has several small towns like the town near the Stamper Place, and how the same sorts of people populate those towns. The narrative (in present tense) then focuses on the Snag, the town's local bar and meeting place, and on the conversation taking place there one night before the present day events of the previous chapter (the encounters between Draeger and Evenwrite, and Draeger and Viv). The angry, anti-Stamper customers at the Snag, including a down-on-his-luck lumberjack, argue about the causes of the various labor troubles in the area. They all say that the union has become helpless in the face of the obstinacy of Hank Stamper and his family. Narrative of this conversation is interspersed with past tense narratives of Evenwrite receiving concrete proof that the Stamper business is scabbing. Its non-union, family employees provide wood for a large lumber company against which the citizens of the town are striking.

Other interspersed narratives include the present tense descriptions of a woman named Indian Jenny contemplating her ex-lovers (including Henry Stamper), and of Draeger seeking out and finding a motel in which to spend the night before moving on to his next job. Finally, there is the interspersed, present tense narrative of a postman delivering a postcard at exactly the moment at which the house to which he's delivering explodes, and he's confronted by a soot-singed young man.

The narrative then begins to move fluidly between a present tense, third person narrative of past events (how the Stamper family gathered to argue about how to continue working in the face of union opposition) and a past tense, first person narrative of how the young man cleaned up after the explosion, packed his few possessions, and left. As he packs, he repeatedly imagines a watchful, perhaps malevolent presence behind him and again and again whirls to catch sight of it. There's nothing there. It's eventually revealed that the young man is Lee, Henry's younger son that the postcard left for him was the postcard mentioned at the end of the previous chapter. The body of it was written by Lee and Hank's cousin Joe-Ben. There was also a scrawled, taunting note from Hank at the bottom.

Upon arriving at the bus depot to catch a cross-country bus for Oregon, Lee telephones his roommate/friend/colleague to explain why he's leaving. He speaks at length about the postcard, continues in drug-hazy detail about the noise and activity at the bus depot, and with semi-deluded insistence states that he knows it's time to go back to Oregon and claim what's rightfully his. The writing in this section, and for most of the rest of the chapter, moves unpredictably between past and present, first person and third person,

self-conscious and objective, hallucinatory and coherent - all evocative of Lee's volatile, fragmented, semi-delirious and quite drugged state of mind. He tells how his therapist refused to diagnose him as insane, imagines appearances by his long dead mother as well as references by friends to her death by suicide. He fantasizes about arriving home and encountering Hank's derision, Henry's denial of his existence, and Joe-Ben's thudding, thoughtless bearish-ness.

Interspersed in Lee's fragmented imaginings are references to Indian Jenny's increasing anger arising from her memories of the racist, abusive Henry, and to the family meeting at which the decision was made to call Lee home. There is also a narrative of events occurring at the same time as Lee is riding the bus and getting closer to the house. Evenwrite confronts the Stampers with his knowledge that they've been scabbing. Henry quickly becomes infuriated, driving Evenwrite out of the house at the very moment Lee is being let off the bus. Lee watches from the shore opposite the house, as Evenwrite jumps into a boat, revs up the motor and races across the river. He carries the papers on which he had the evidence of Hank's scabbing scattering to the wind and water. At the same time, Hank runs to a nearby shed and comes back with a couple of small bombs. He throws them into the water close to Evenwrite and they explode, nearly swamping him. Evenwrite makes it to shore, taunts Lee, and runs into his car. Lee, for his part, gets into the boat and crosses the lake, picking up Hank, who has swum out to meet him. As soon as he's in the boat, Hank taunts his little brother. It seems as though their relationship has gone right back to the way things were when Lee left.

The chapter concludes with Indian Jenny invoking curses on the Stampers, Draeger making notes in his journal, Lee wondering what's going to happen next with his family. Now, they are very drunk customers at the bar shouting their complaints about how bad times are. The down-and-out lumberjack shakes his head and says to them all "Don't you see it's just the same plain old horseshit as always?"

Chapter 2 Analysis

This chapter's prologue, essentially a reference to the way perspectives can and do change, functions on several levels. Firstly, it's a metaphoric representation of the attitudes held by both Lee and the town towards the Stamper family, and the way in which both look beyond their anger and resentment and see opportunities for revenge. On another level, it represents and foreshadows Viv's eventual change in perspective, from believing that life with the Stampers is her only option to realizing the possibility of freedom and fulfillment in life outside the family. Finally, it represents and defines the novel's stylistic technique of constantly shifting points of view and narrative voice.

Once the chapter proper begins, there are several important elements of which to take note. The first is essentially plot based, as the nature of the conflict between the Stampers and the town and Floyd Evenwrite becomes clear. Floyd's private reasons for being so involved are revealed later (Chapter 7). Another important element is the introduction of Indian Jenny, a character who is on one level peripheral to the main

action, but who serves as important metaphoric illumination of events and relationships. Specifically, her painful past with Henry symbolizes and embodies other painful histories, those of the town and his sons included. She functions on a similar level on each of her appearances throughout the novel. It's important to note at this point that the novel's final moments focus on her and her finally being able to move beyond the past and into the future. This raises the possibility that she not only metaphorically embodies the past but also the future, or perhaps more specifically the ability to transcend the past and move into a new life.

The most important element in this chapter is the development of the novel's narrative style, shifting as it does between the perspectives of various characters, different voices (first person, third person, omniscient), different time frames (past, present), and different locations (Lee's bus, the Stamper family home). The thematic point of this stylistic choice is that there is no objective, single truth in this story. There is only interpretation, that of the characters and that of the reader, who must remember that each different narrative perspective is unavoidably colored by the attitudes, prejudices and feelings of each character, including the omniscient third person narrator, brings to the situation. Thus, the reader is placed in a position of having to define the truth of events for him/her self. An example of the way perspective can color interpretation can be found in a comment from the self-aware, self-absorbed and self-conscious Lee. As he narrates his portion of the story, he describes himself as being "objective and courageous thanks to ... modern narrative technique." This statement indicates that he's far from objective. If he were truly objective, he'd be equally as aware of the perspectives of Hank and other characters as he's aware of his own, and equally as prepared to comment on and/or explore them.

The comment of the drunken lumberjack at the close of the chapter functions on two levels. Within the context of the moment, he's talking about the state of the local economy and the town's relationship with the Stampers. However, within the context of the novel as a whole, he's unconsciously referring to the nature of the relationship between Lee and Hank. Finally, the reference in Lee's narrative to constantly looking around for a suspected presence behind him foreshadows the reference in the following chapter to a trick Hank used to play on him - the "Hide Behind" game.

Chapter 3

Chapter 3 Summary

The short prologue for this chapter uses the poetic image of the ember-red end of a lit stick to illustrate the impermanence and changeability of time, referring to how Hank knew the truth of that point.

The chapter itself begins in third person past tense narration of a story from Hank's past. It tells about how he took three baby bobcats from their nest deep in a thorny thicket and, with the help of his Uncle Ben, built a beautiful big home for and tamed them. Interspersed with this story is a first person past tense narrative in Hank's voice of a union meeting he had years ago with Floyd Evenwrite.

One night, the bobcats are in the cage when a storm hits, and Hank goes out to check on the rising river. He sees Henry shoring up the dams to keep the house from being flooded. He's casually sauntering back into the house, when Henry asks him for help. The next day, Hank is horrified to discover that the cage has been swept away, and the three bobcats have been drowned. The narrative of this discovery is interspersed with the first person narrative of the confrontation between Evenwrite and Hank over how all the union wants is "a fair advantage." At that point the story of the bobcats changes narrative voice, and is recounted in first person past tense by Hank. He tells how he covered up his feelings. The drowning of the bobcats marked the beginning of his fight to resist the power and influence of the river, seeing it in the same terms as the union - wanting its "fair advantage." He reveals how he only understood this aspect to his life as the result of the confrontation with Evenwrite. However, he also came to understand how there were more ways to win than by being tough. He says he learned this lesson from Lee, and the narrative then shifts to the moment at which Hank was picked up in Lee's boat.

As he rides across the water with Lee, Hank recalls their uneasy childhood, the way Lee refused to learn to play football and the way he (Hank) taunted him with their father's approval. He recalls one particular taunt involving the invention of a strange animal called the Hide-behind. It acts in the same way as Lee's hallucination in the previous chapter in lurking invisibly and menacingly behind him and disappearing the instant he turns to see what's there. He also comments, with reluctant and surprised admiration, on how physically impressive Lee is. He compares him to both Bobby Stokes (his father's sickly old friend) and to Joe-Ben, whose father Ben was big, strong, sexy and handsome. He recalls how Joe-Ben felt overpowered by his father's presence, until he was scarred by an angry attack from the woman he eventually married at roughly the same time as Ben disappeared into the mountains. He also recalls how Joe-Ben had several children. On the day the last was born, there were several incidents he interpreted as omens that he should have no more. There was a hurricane, the discovery of Ben's body in a cabin "full of girlie books," and the news that Henry's wife (Lee's mother) had killed herself. Recalling this last incident returns Hank to the present.

He narrates how he and Lee arrive on the dock by the house and are greeted by several dogs, one of which Lee thinks he recognizes. Hank knows this is impossible but keeps his mouth shut. The time for waking his brother up to reality, he decides, is later.

The narrative shifts focus onto Lee's reactions and thoughts, as he watches Hank going into the house. He then follows him in, seeing that in terms of decoration, cleanliness (or lack thereof) and clutter, it's almost exactly the way he left it. As he's wondering how he fits in, the narrative interjects scenes narrated from Hank's first person point of view in which he (Hank) urges Henry to greet Lee calmly. Henry refuses. Narrative lines converge as Henry goes eagerly and effusively into the front room to greet Lee, who is quickly both overwhelmed and incredulous that this man is his father. After a brief, intense and complicated discussion about food, sleeping arrangements and Lee's luggage (which was taken into the depot by the bus driver), Lee is shown into his own room. It's next to his mother's. As he falls asleep, he hears a woman singing.

Narration then tells how Hank's wife Viv was the one who was singing. She expresses to Hank her fears of the women she's about to go into town to socialize with. Hank reassures her and sends her on her way. Meanwhile, the down-and-out logger, desperate to hear another human voice, shouts across the river and awakens an echo. Finally, a town woman named Simone reflects on how she's been generous with her sexual favors. Men have done her favors in return, but she would NEVER admit to being a prostitute. As she reflects, however, she realizes that's exactly what she is and refuses to accept favors from men ever again.

The narrative's focus returns to Lee, who wakes up to the still-familiar sound of Hank pounding on the dock to make sure it's still solid. As the narrative alternates between first and third person perspective, Lee looks through his still-present comic book collection and discovers his stack of Captain Marvel comic books intact. He recalls how Captain Marvel, among all the super heroes, was his favorite. In real life, he was a scrawny little kid just like he (Lee) was, a kid named Billy Batson, and transformed into a mighty super-being at the use of a magic word. He recalls having searched his whole life for his magic word, and then suddenly recalls an opening in the wall, through which he used to look at the room next door. Narration reveals that he used to look through at his mother's room. He struggles to resist looking through it now, but finally gives in to see that it's been turned into a small sitting room/library. He comes to the realization that it could be for no one else than Hank's wife, whom he first saw on the dock and imagines to be delicate, intelligent and beautiful.

At that moment, Hank and Viv (his wife) return. Viv is upset, because the women in town treated her badly, and Hank seems to be unsympathetic. She locks herself in her sitting room. After pleading for several minutes for her to let him in, Hank goes away. Lee, who has heard their entire conversation, goes back to bed. He realizes Hank isn't as powerful as he (Lee) once believed him to be. All his life, he's been looking for the wrong magic word.

In the room next door, Viv gets ready for bed, wondering why Hank can't see things her way. Meanwhile, Evenwrite loses his temper when he discovers that the documentation

with which he confronted Hank earlier and lost in his flight to the boat can't be recreated. Simone prays, convinced that her intentions are pure but doubtful that her actions are. The down-and-out logger begins to forget that the voice he's hearing is his own, imagining that it's someone else. "And ... mildew stalks the front-room rug where Hank left wet footprints; and the river roams the fields like a glistening bird of prey."

Chapter 3 Analysis

The prologue's metaphorical commentary on the inevitable change brought about by the passage of time functions on two levels. First, it's a reiteration of the thematic point made by the novel's time-bending stylistic approach, in that looking back on an event in the past through the lens of time re-defines its meaning. The metaphor also foreshadows the process of change undergone by the novel's characters, both the principal ones and the secondary ones. In terms of the chapter, the idea of the nature of change is developed in several ways. First, it's introduced through the bobcat story (which shows how everything can change overnight), and then via the brief glimpses of Simone (which foreshadows later developments in the novel that show how an individual's attitudes about him/her self can and do change over time). Most importantly, it's developed through Lee's discovery of his favorite childhood comic books. It's a particularly vivid example of how the meaning and/or value of a circumstance in the past can take on a different interpretation in the present through the passage of time.

The discovery of the comic books is important for another reason. It symbolizes Lee's quest for his own power, or as he describes it, his own magic words that will give him that power. Later in the novel (Chapter 9), he believes he's found those words, meaning that the reference here also foreshadows the discovery. A second important piece of foreshadowing can be found in Hank's narrated comment that he learned from Lee how strength can be gained through weakness. This foreshadows the moment in Chapter 9, when he actually makes the discovery. A third piece of foreshadowing occurs in Lee's reference to looking through the wall, an aspect to the story which plays a key role in the climactic intimacies between Lee and Viv in Chapter 9, as well as Hank's reaction to those intimacies.

As was the case with Indian Jenny in Chapter 2, the appearances and actions of secondary characters mirror and illuminate actions and situations in the lives of the principals. Specifically, the struggles of Simone, Evenwrite and the logger to deal with the illusions that dominate their lives illuminate Lee's and Viv's struggles to deal with the illusions they find in theirs. Lee's illusions include his belief that taking revenge on Hank will free him from years of anger, bitterness and resentment. Viv's illusions are centered on what she thinks is her happiness with Hank and with his family. The parallels between the two sets of characters raise important questions that echo throughout the action of the novel. Will Lee and Viv surrender to their illusions, as the logger does? Will they ask themselves the hard questions, like Simone? Will they react to change with anger, like Evenwrite? Only future chapters will, tell. Meanwhile the logger's attempts to awaken an echo foreshadow moments in the Chapter 6 Prologue and also an interlude in the same chapter in which the metaphoric meaning of echoes is defined as

representing the way incidents in the past echo in the present, triggering reactions in the now to situations in the once was.

The reference to the Hide-behind game, foreshadowed in Chapter 2, defines an important aspect not only of the relationship between the two brothers but also an important aspect of Lee's personality. On the level of relationship, the story defines the competition and power struggle that went on between him and Hank throughout their childhoods, and which provides the foundation for the struggle that continues in the present. On another level, the story is particularly representative of Lee's unconscious belief that Hank was, and is, always lurking, ready and waiting to trick him, trap him, and/or humiliate him. This belief, in turn, fuels Lee's ever-increasing desire for revenge on his brother. The effects of this are foreshadowed in the vague menace of the chapter's final words.

The drowning death of the bobcats resulting from the sudden rise of the river is another example of the way water represents, throughout the novel, the potentially destructive power of randomness. As such, it foreshadows Joe-Ben's death by drowning in similar circumstances, as the result of an apparently random accident in Chapter 9. Meanwhile, the exploration of Hank's sense of guilt for having caused the death of the bobcats by his neglect foreshadows his subconscious sense of guilt because of Joe-Ben's death. It's an aspect of his experience, which is one course of his explosion of temper, directed at Lee at the novel's climax in Chapter 11.

Chapter 4

Chapter 4 Summary

The prologue to this chapter makes a poetic reference to knowing what you trust and trusting what you know.

The chapter proper begins with a narrative of how the people of the town talk about Viv differently from the way they talk about other women. They make sexual comments about all of them but her. Narration then recounts how Hank and Viv met, when Hank rode through her hometown on the motorcycle he bought with the money he got after being discharged from the army following his time in Korea. As the narrative poetically reveals how uneasy he was, first person narratives written from Hank's point of view compare his uneasiness then to his uneasiness in the present, referring specifically to his concerns about Lee.

Narration recounts how Viv and Hank were instantly attracted to each other, making love in the back of a pickup truck the night they met. Viv is described in terms that define her as ethereally beautiful, with a perspective on life, love and sexuality that makes her seem, to Hank and the reader, quite different from most people. Narration also refers to her desire to find that one "someone" with whom she can share a meaningful, transformative life. Hank leaves her to return home, spends a summer working with Henry in the logging business, and then returns to get her. She leaves her home and journeys with him to Oregon, where Hank sets her up with the kind of small pet songbird that she longs for, as well as a private room where she can retreat from all the Stamper rough and tumble. Meanwhile, Hank's interspersed narratives refer to how he realizes Lee has to be treated in a similar way. As Joe-Ben puts it, Lee and Viv are both "sensitives."

The narrative then changes focus to Lee. It describes in first person his reactions when Henry shouts him out of bed, his reluctance as he drags himself down to the kitchen for breakfast, his revulsion at the greasy, starchy breakfast itself, and his awkwardness as he tries to make conversation with Hank. The awkwardness is mutual, as indicated in Hank's ongoing first person interjections. The narration continually shifts point of view. It changes from Lee's first person to omniscient third person to Hank's first person interjections, as Lee is dressed in the right boots, clothes and gloves for logging, and the men (Hank, Joe-Ben and Lee) go down to the boat that will carry them to the logging site. As they go, they pick up a couple of passengers. There's Andy, a friend of the family, and Les, a fussy man whom Joe-Ben doesn't like and whom they drop off by the side of the river so he can pick up his car. The three Stampers and Andy go into the woods and begin their day's work, with Hank assigning Lee the most menial and grubby job possible, and Lee taking it as a sign of Hank's contempt.

Shifts of narrative, however, reveal that Hank genuinely considers the job he gives Lee to be the one most suited to his capabilities, and that he (Hank) is still struggling to find

a way to connect with him. They break for lunch, and Lee discovers that Viv has added something a little special to them in a sweet, homemade dessert. Hank says she always does that kind of thing. He comments in an interjected narration that Viv's lunches are something to look forward to in the morning, and something nice to reflect on during the afternoon.

At the end of a long, hard, and very painful day for Lee, the Stampers return home, again picking Les up and dropping him off. Les tells Hank that a man named Biggy Newton, whom Hank pissed off some time ago, is eager to fight him, and Hank very calmly says he's looking forward to it, crushing an aerosol can as he says it. When he's dropped off, Les rushes away, quite frightened. The Stampers return home. Lee goes immediately to bed. His first person narrative reveals that his thoughts of revenge on Hank (for being so awful to him in general and for sleeping with his mother in particular) are stronger than ever. He is determined to find the most painful way possible to get back at him. Meanwhile, third person narration focuses on Hank, on his reaching out for comfort from Viv, and on his idea that she and Lee are kindred spirits and that she might be able to talk to him in ways that he (Hank) can't. Viv, also in third person present tense narration, goes to her sitting room and gets changed for dinner. This narration is intercut with Lee's first person past tense narration of seeing Viv nude. He realizes that she is the perfect vehicle through which he can hurt Hank. He can see she's been crying.

Chapter 4 Analysis

The prologue to this section is more ironic than most of the prologues, since the action of the chapter it precedes is essentially grounded in the actions of people who trust no one (Hank and Henry), or the actions of people betraying, or plotting to betray, the trust of others (Lee, Viv in running away from her parents). The portrayal here of the shifting patterns of trust/mistrust is essentially plot-like in nature, as the groundwork is laid for future betrayals on all fronts.

The most notable aspect of this chapter is the way the shifting of tenses and perspectives greatly vary and are more complex than anywhere else in the novel. On one level, this gives a very clear sense of the coiling, roiling dynamics at work in this family. There's watchfulness, judgmental-ness, fear, hope and plotting. It's truly a jigsaw puzzle, with all the different kinds of pieces, the shapes and styles, fitting together into a single narrative experience. It's important to note that, for the most part, the nature of that experience, its particular content and meaning, are left for the reader to define. Meanwhile, the reference to Biggy Newton foreshadows his appearance in Chapter 6 Part 2 and the fight he and Hank get into. The symbolic value of this is defined in reference to that chapter. Finally, the reference to Viv's dessert, and in fact to all the special treats she puts into the various lunches, symbolizes the touch of humanity and vulnerability she brings to the lives of all the Stampers. Particularly it touches the lives of both men interested in developing relationships with her, Hank and Lee.

Chapter 5, Part 1

Chapter 5, Part 1 Summary

The prologue to this chapter refers poetically to the fluidity of time, the way a moment in the present can bring back powerful and immediate sensations of the past.

The chapter begins with brief references to the glimpsed fearfulnesses of Indian Jenny's father, Simone the prostitute, the manager of the movie theatre, Evenwrite, and a dog named Molly. A brief poetic reference, similar in tone to the prologue, refers again to the power of memory, transitioning into a present tense narration of Joe-Ben recalling his childhood and the stories he heard Hank and his father tell around the fire. More transitional references to the theatre manager and Indian Jenny's father lead into first person narration from Lee's point of view about the almost playful and friendly conversation he has with Hank about Viv and her many good points. This narration also includes references to Lee's determination to prevent Hank's, Viv's, or anyone's niceness deter him from his mission of revenge on Hank. Hank takes Lee down to the kitchen, where he (Lee) is finally introduced to Viv. They banter playfully, and then Hank goes down to tend to his boat. Viv, meanwhile, tends to scrapes on Lee's arms acquired while he was working. Lee senses that her need to take care of those more vulnerable is a weakness he can exploit in order to hurt Hank.

Following a brief interlude in which the narrative jumps forward to Lee smoking marijuana and writing to his ex-roommate, the narrative returns to the present and the recounting of conversation between Hank and Lee after dinner. Lee, drunk on homemade wine, finds himself talking about his mother's suicide. He reacts angrily to Hank's reference to the wreath he sent and reflects on how it was the only wreath there. Lee in his narration comments that in spite of his intentions, he was coming to care for his family. He realizes that if the conversation between him and Hank had continued just a few moments more, things between them might have turned out differently. As it stands, Hank and Viv go upstairs to bed, just when the possibility for connection between the two brothers was at its highest.

Henry drinks in the Snag, telling his long-winded stories. At a table in the back, the semi-talented members of a local dance band write letters, arguing over spelling and who has the right to write to a particular attractive woman. Indian Jenny comes in, having received her social assistance check from the government. She's prepared to spend money. She asks the dance band members to play her favorite songs in the slow, sensual way she likes. They agree. Meanwhile, Hank, Lee and Joe-Ben come home happy after an exceptionally productive day that included the killing and poaching of a big deer and the annoying Les's fall into the water. Joe-Ben insists that Lee is starting to get used to the lumberjacking life. Lee finds himself admitting that he's starting to feel less worn out by the day's work. The family sits down to a noisy, friendly, dinner of fried deer liver and baked apples. As Lee goes to the shed to fetch cream for the apples, narration shifts into first person past tense. Lee tells of his memories of doing the same

kind of thing as a child, but always under a cloud of resentment and anger. This time, he seems embarrassed to admit that he actually feels at home and welcome. This sense of almost belonging increases, when he crosses the river to collect Henry, who has come home from the Snag roaring drunk.

As Henry and the rest of the family eat their baked apples, Hank tells stories of his youthful logging days, engaging Joe-Ben's children and even Lee's lonely, longing inner child with suspenseful wondering about what's going to happen next. When the story's concluded, Joe-Ben and his wife take their children upstairs, with Lee becoming sentimentally moved by the cozy familyness of it all. He takes the opportunity of being alone with his father to ask whether he (Lee) can accompany the others on their next hunting trip, and Henry, without indicating how much he must be surprised by the request, agrees. He then goes up to bed, helped by Viv. Lee realizes that he no longer wants to take revenge on Hank, but instead wants to enjoy being part of a family.

After discussing with Lee and Joe-Ben about whether Henry is losing his mind or just actively transforming himself into the town "character," Hank suggests that they take the dogs for a run to limber them up to hunt. Viv, having returned from putting Henry to bed, suggests that it might be a little late if they have to go to work in the morning. However, Hank says that because this day was so productive they can take tomorrow off. Plans are made, and in his narration, Lee reveals that he plans to get Viv alone and confess his earlier desire for revenge. Interspersed narration recounts Henry's struggle with his youthful spirit (HIS inner child), who wants to go out and hunt and cut lumber and have sex the way he used to. Meanwhile, Lee's narration reveals that he never got the chance to talk with Viv. He's glad that he didn't, since when they returned, Hank revealed just how nasty he was still capable of being.

Chapter 5, Part 1 Analysis

This chapter's prologue comments on the fluidity of time, and how it flows back and forth within and upon itself. It foreshadows and defines the extremely fluid nature of the narrative that follows. Past and present entwine more seamlessly in this chapter than they do in any other, with the result that motivations then and motivations now become mixed up with longings then and now, resentments then and now, and little moments of happiness then and now. In many ways, the past becomes indistinguishable from the present, an important aspect of the play's thematic point that there is no core truth to experience, only perspective from different points of view. Here again, the play's style mirrors and embodies its thematic substance.

As was the case in previous chapters, the narratives focused on the secondary characters illuminate events, attitudes and perspectives in the stories of the principal characters. One example in this chapter can be found in the reference to Indian Jenny's father and her fear of him, both of which echo the way Hank and Lee both have difficult relationships with THEIR father (Henry). Another example is the narrative diversion to the band members, with their arguments about women illuminating and foreshadowing the unspoken argument between Hank and Lee over Viv. The appearance of the band

also foreshadows the band's appearance at the novel's climax (Chapter 11), in which one of its members behaves with the same kind of self-destructive attitude as Lee. Other foreshadowing includes the reference to Molly the dog. Her symbolic appearance in the next half of this chapter is foreshadowed at the beginning of THIS half. There's also Lee's reference at the end of this half to a fight between him and Hank. It's a fight that defines the climax of this lengthy, complex chapter.

Chapter 5, Part 2

Chapter 5, Part 2 Summary

In third person past tense narration, Lee, Viv and Henry walk up to the shack in the woods where they have arranged to meet Hank and Joe Bob once they've finished with the hunt. As they walk, Viv reflects on the many walks she took to and from the shack when she was first married, enjoying the quiet, the solitude, the songs of the birds, and the feeling of being pregnant. When the three of them arrive at the shack, they discover that Hank has set a fire for them and left the sack of sandwiches Viv had prepared hanging where a raccoon could reach it. Henry chases off the raccoon, Viv puts on a pot of coffee, Lee sits by the fire, Viv sits beside him, and as Henry starts into a long and rambling reminiscence of his younger hunting days, Viv realizes that Lee is stealthily caressing her neck.

As Henry listens to the baying of the hunting dogs in the distance and continues his stories, narration moves back and forth between several perspectives. The first is Viv's half-fearful, half-stimulated first person narrative of being caressed, with her passions rising and sparking in the same way as the fire. The second is a third person narrative of Molly the dog, tracking a bear and then fleeing desperately when she encounters it. The third is third person narrative of Henry's story and Lee's over-intellectual questions. When Henry goes off into the woods to urinate, Lee takes the opportunity of being alone with Viv to begin his confession, persistently detailing his painful childhood in spite of her confused reluctance to listen. As Hank and Joe-Ben approach, Lee insists that he needs to talk with her further. He arranges to accompany her on an expedition to collect rock oysters.

Narration reveals that Viv comes close to responding to the pain and need in his eyes, but is interrupted by Hank and Joe-Ben emerging from the dark forest. Viv, perhaps over-eagerly, greets her husband. Meanwhile, first person interjections from Lee's point of view reveal that their conversation provided fuel for his eventual revenge, as did Hank's drunken eruption of temper when they all went back to the house.

What exactly happened during their confrontation is hinted at several times and in several ways throughout the following section. It begins with Hank, Viv and Lee going back to the house and leaving Joe-Ben alone at the shack, having promised to look for Molly. Fear gets the better of him for a while, as he drinks cup after cup of coffee and tries to avoid imagining the ghost of his father roaming through the woods. As narration interjects brief glimpses of Viv curling up alone in her room and Lee settling down with his marijuana to write his letter, Joe-Ben finally gets up his nerve and goes out into the dark, eventually returning to the shack where he discovers Hank, who has come back up after his fight with Lee. (Events happen out of linear sequence in this section).

The conversation between Hank and Joe-Ben is interrupted by the arrival of Molly, dragging her half-paralyzed hind legs. Hank realizes she's been bitten by a snake and

rushes with her and Joe-Ben to the dock, where he tells Joe-Ben to take her into the vet. Joe-Ben seems surprised that Hank isn't taking her himself, but Hank says he's uneasy about the rain clouds and wants to make sure the house's fortifications against flooding are secure. There are echoes here of the earlier incident (Chapter 3) in which he neglected to take care of his bobcats and discovered the following morning that they were killed. In wanting to check the flood defenses, he's also acting the same way Henry did in that incident.

Meanwhile, narration splits into two different perspectives. There's the first person present, as Lee describes in his letter the argument with Hank, and third person past as the fight between Lee and Hank is related. Their conversation begins calmly enough as a conversation over which coast is better, east or west, and evolves into a more specific discussion over which coast has better music. This leads them into a discussion of their respective, and very different, favorite jazz musicians. Soon, their arguments get nastier and angrier, quickly degenerating into little boy-type arguments in which Lee tells Hank to not to touch his records. Lee's marijuana-affected narration becomes self-pitying as he describes his behavior as cowardly and victim-like while describing Hank's behavior as unjust and exactly the way he was as a child.

Later, after Hank has stormed out, Viv tries to apologize for him. Lee insists that Hank was right. Viv wonders whether it's possible for someone, anyone to convince Lee that he's not the victim. Lee suggests that she could do it on their oyster collecting date the following day. Any answer that Viv might have made is lost in the rambling incoherence of the rest of Lee's letter, filled with images of hate, resentment, drowning, and being overwhelmed. Finally, Lee's pen runs out of ink. He tears the letter into shreds, throws it all out the window, and falls asleep.

Chapter 5, Part 2 Analysis

The first part of this second half of the chapter contains the first reference to Viv's past pregnancy. There's been no mention of a child of Hank and Viv's up to this point, neither has there been any reference to her having even been pregnant. Both of these circumstances suggest that Viv lost the baby, an aspect of her life confirmed later in the novel. This is important for two reasons. First, the reference is the first part of a symbolic statement that her hopes for happiness and contentment in her marriage (that Hank is the "someone" with whom she can spend her life) have also died. Second, when considered in connection with Lee's having seen Viv cry (Chapter 4), the reference to her happiness at being pregnant in the past hints of a deep loneliness and sadness in the present serve as at least a partial explanation for why she allows Lee to caress her. Meanwhile, her half-fearful, half-stimulated reaction to Lee's attentions is echoed in the story of Molly the dog and her half-fearful, half-stimulated reaction to hunting the bear. This is one of several layers of meaning to the "Molly" diversion. Another is its symbolic reference to how Lee is "hunting" Viv and in turn "hunting" Hank, while Hank, in his turn, is also "hunting" Lee.

The main part of this section of the chapter is focused on the splintered-time narrative of the fight between Hank and Lee. Here again is an example of the way in which the play's narrative style embodies its thematic substance, with the truth of what happened only becoming apparent once various perspectives, attitudes, recollections and styles of recollection are sorted out. On another level, the fight over the records is a focus and a manifestation of what's really going on between them, the ongoing, resentment-fueled struggle for respect and dominance.

There are two important pieces of simultaneous foreshadowing in this section. The first is the reference to Molly having been wounded, which both foreshadows and symbolizes wounds suffered by just about all of the principal characters later in the novel. The idea that her paralysis was caused by snake venom is also both foreshadowing and a symbol. There are "venomous" desires for revenge, control and being right. They're the causes for emotional injuries suffered by Hank and Viv and Lee as well as the physical injuries suffered by Henry and perhaps even Joe-Bob's death. The second instance of foreshadowing occurs in the reference to the rain, which foreshadows the appearance of rain in the middle of the following chapter, as well as its symbolically relevant presence throughout the action of the following four chapters.

Chapter 6, Part 1

Chapter 6, Part 1 Summary

The prologue for this chapter poetically describes a valley in the mountains near the Stamper Place in which a shouter can sing along with his echo, but only in the echo's tempo and rhythm. "...an echo is an inflexible and pitiless taskmaster: you sing the echo's way because it is damned sure not going to sing yours."

The chapter begins with references to it being the day of Halloween, and to Indian Jenny reading a page of the Bible and then using it for toilet paper, likening the flash of insight she receives from her reading to the relief she feels after a good shit. There are also references to a real estate man, who writes taunting slogans on his house in soap so that anyone indulging in the Halloween tradition of soaping EVERY house won't get his, and a long reference to Joe-Ben's simple, joyful faith in God and beauty.

At breakfast at the Stamper House, Lee is troubled by a marijuana hangover. Hank is troubled by an anger hangover. A silent Viv is troubled by a flirtation hangover. Lee agrees to accompany Joe-Ben into church and arranges to meet Viv afterwards. Narration at this point shifts into first person past, as Lee tells what happened that day. After driving into town with Joe-Ben and his family, and after discovering that he's unable to sit through more than five minutes of the revival-style church service, Lee leaves and walks through town to keep his appointment with Viv. As he goes, he recalls (in interspersed narrative written in first person present) a Halloween when he was a child, forced to go trick or treating with Hank and fearfully evading him, other trick or treaters, and the full moon.

In the present, Lee encounters a car full of exactly the kind of rowdies he was afraid of as a child, who give him a short ride and let him off when he insists he's where he needs to go. He then walks along the beach, recalling how he hid from Hank and eventually re-encountering the rowdies, who bully him into helping them push their trapped car out of the sand and away from the advancing tide. Just as it becomes clear that they're about to assault him because he's a Stamper, they run off when they see Hank coming. He tells Lee that Joe-Ben called to say Lee had disappeared and that the townspeople were meeting at the Snag to discuss the strike and the Stamper's scabbing. He also says Viv decided to stay home rather than come and dig oysters, and tells Lee to come with him to the Snag. They leave the beach and head into town, Lee realizing that his plan for taking revenge on Hank is taking shape. He believes Hank is fearful of something going on between him (Lee) and Viv, and is starting to react to that fear.

As Hank and Lee walk, the narrative shifts focus to a third person present recollection by Lee of the Halloween when he was a boy, fell into a deep hole and had to be rescued by Hank, the hole collapsing completely at the moment they got out. During and after the rescue, Hank tells stories of how his uncles Ben and Aaron dug a hole for an

outhouse. Ben left Aaron down there to get water, Aaron managed to climb up without the aid of a ladder, and Ben looked down to see the dead body of a horse. The narrative at that point shifts perspective, telling the same story from Hank's first person present point of view and commenting that Lee in the present, after the incident with the rowdies, has the same sort of secretively happy attitude that he did in the past - as though he knows something Hank doesn't. They discuss how Evenwrite's report on the Stampers' scabbing has become known throughout the town. The town has become even more resentful of the Stampers, and Hank is eager to confront the townspeople. As they walk up the beach, they feel the first drops of rain.

Chapter 6, Part 1 Analysis

The reference in the Prologue to echoes can be interpreted as symbolizing the way the remembered past returns, like an echo, to direct actions in the present. This principle can be seen as applying to the actions, reactions and intentions of several of the novel's main characters, particularly Lee, Hank, Henry, Viv and Evenwrite, throughout the narrative. The past is particularly present in the lives of both Lee and Hank throughout this chapter. In this first section, the incident with the rowdies vividly reminds Lee of his painful childhood and (to him) embarrassing dependence on Hank. It's a dependence that he's determined to free himself from. On another level, there is a sense of deepening mystery about this section, in that it's difficult to determine whether Lee's suspicions are correct - does Hank suspect something, or does he not? His comments about Viv staying home and Lee's apparently having a secret would appear to indicate that such suspicions are growing, but it must be remembered that that interpretation rests at least in part on Lee's interpretation of Hank's actions. The reader wonders if Hank knows what's going on only because Lee thinks he does and, on some level, wants him to - it's part of his plan for taking revenge on Hank by challenging his sense of security. The mystery of what Hank does / doesn't suspect continues throughout the chapter, at last being answered in Chapter 9 when he finally discovers the truth.

The reference to rain at the end of Chapter 6 foreshadows the deluge of rain that begins in Chapter 7, and therefore the development of the rain's double symbolic meaning. On one level, the rain represents the rage that the town feels at Hank and the other Stampers, and of the rage building between Hank and Lee. Both elements of rage, however, are in fact aspects of the dangerous unpredictability represented by all the various appearances of water throughout the novel. This is the rain's second layer of symbolic meaning.

Chapter 6, Part 2

Chapter 6, Part 2 Summary

This section begins with another poetic reference to the power of echoes - this time the echo of forgotten music that still has the power to make the hearer dance. The reference again is to the way the past (echoes of previous actions) drive RE-actions in the present.

The narrative moves into the past, recounting how Joe-Ben was told as he was leaving church that there was going to be a town meeting about the Stampers, and that after that meeting he and his family was going to see what's what. Joe-Ben drops his family off at the house they've been building and decorating and goes to the town hall. He plans to eavesdrop on the meeting. As he gets himself into position and waits, his memory returns to a high-school era confrontation between Hank and a boy named Tommy, who seems as though he had it in for Hank right from day one. They both knew a fight was coming eventually and Hank tried to avoid it. However, one day after football practice, their mutual hatred spilled into a fight that ended Tommy's football playing for the season. The implication of this memory is that Hank is gearing up for the same kind of fight. Joe-Ben's recollections are interrupted by the town meeting being called to order.

Narration then skips to events following the meeting. Joe-Ben calls the Stamper Place and tells his family what happened. He then goes to the new house and vents some of his excited energy by painting the walls. Hank and Lee arrive, and Hank goes out with Joe-Ben and the kids trick or treating, while Lee dries out in front of the fire. After a quick supper of burgers, the three men go down to the Snag. At this point, narrative focus continually shifts between Hank's first person present and Lee's first person past as events at the Snag play out. These include the overly playful, eagerly waiting reaction of the unusually large crowd, the arrival of Hank's rival Biggy Newton (first mentioned in Chapter 4), Hank's limiting of his drink intake, a growing atmosphere of anticipated violence, and Hank taunting Biggy. As the fight begins, Lee suddenly realizes that at least part of what Hank is doing is showing him (Lee) what might happen to him if he continues to pursue the relationship with Viv.

Narration jumps to the hours after the fight as Joe-Ben is driving Hank and Lee home, revealing that Hank has seriously beaten Biggy, that Lee is repulsed by what happened, and that after the fight Hank got drunk. Lightning flashes, thunder rolls and rain begins to fall as they arrive home. Hank checks the water level on the river and discovers it's fine and the house is secure. He then goes in to accept Viv's treatment of his wounds. Lee goes to bed, reflecting that Hank was "brutal and beautiful all at once." Down the hall, Viv gently puts Hank to bed and tenderly kisses him goodnight, seeing in his exhausted face the man she fell in love with. Hank sleeps.

Chapter 6, Part 2 Analysis

The action of this section is anchored by the confrontation between Hank and Biggy, a fight foreshadowed by Joe-Bob's recollections of the high school fight between Hank and Tommy at the beginning of this section. The fight itself functions on several levels. The first is relatively straightforward, as a means for Hank to vent his increasing anger and frustration with Lee, with the labor situation, and with the resentment of the town. On another level, as Lee himself points out in his narration, it serves as a warning to Lee about what will happen to him if he continues to develop a relationship with Viv. On a third level, the fight represents the ongoing tension between the Stampers and the town. The cheering crowd at the Snag represents the way the townspeople are desperate for someone to beat not just Hank but the entire Stamper clan.

Desperation, as previously discussed, is symbolized by the rain, which has been threatening over the last few chapters, serves as a dominant backdrop for the action of the following chapters. It's also the predominant manifestation of one of the novel's most important symbols, that of water and its metaphoric representation of the unpredictability of life. The threat of rain, its ongoing presence throughout the action of the next few chapters, and the threat it poses to Hank's plan for dominance over the lumber industry and the town, are all manifestations of this metaphor, which has been effectively in place since the beginning of the novel. In Chapter 9, there are two further manifestations of this symbol, but it is also developed extensively in the following section.

Chapter 7

Chapter 7 Summary

The brief prologue to this section refers to a university professor who distilled drinking alcohol from a poisonous plant, saying to anyone who expressed concern that "one man's poison is another man's high."

The narration of the chapter begins with a detailed description of the heavy rain that began to fall the night of the fight between Hank and Newton, and how Teddy (the bartender at the Snag) always did good business when the weather was bad. Teddy listens closely to the conversations going on in the bar, as does Draeger. Several townspeople are convinced that the rain is nothing more than a downpour. However, Evenwrite is convinced that unless the rain stops, the union's chances of making up time lost to the strike and business lost to the Stampers are going to be washed away like the banks of the river. Interspersed with narration of Evenwrite's increasingly desperate argument is first person commentary from Teddy's perspective, as he watches and listens. Draeger suggests that he and Evenwrite cross the river and talk to Hank. At first, Evenwrite resists, partly because of the bad weather and partly because he believes talking to Hank is useless. Draeger convinces him. They rent a boat, cross in the rain, become lost in the dark and are nearly attacked by the Stamper dogs when they reach the shore. Joe-Ben rescues them and cheerfully takes them into the house to warm and drink coffee. Evenwrite is mistrustful of the Stampers' hospitality, but Draeger is gracious and accepting, suggesting that they go out and meet Hank out on the banks of the river where he's shoring up the defenses against the water. Evenwrite again protests, but eventually goes along with the idea. He and Draeger try to convince Hank to stop scabbing so the strike can end and the working men of the town can go back to providing for their families, attempting to awaken Hank's sense of community. Hank, however, reveals that he has NO sense of community, that when it comes down to the nitty gritty he's out for himself.

Draeger becomes quieter and quieter, as Evenwrite becomes more and more frustrated and Hank finally erupts in an angry tirade that ends with the question of why he should care about the people of the town when none of them made a move to help him up after the fight with Newton. Draeger decides it's time to go, and the men return to town.

Back at the Snag, where Teddy again listens and watches closely, Draeger calmly makes notes on a paper placemat as Evenwrite angrily insists that something more be done, deciding it's time for a picket, even though picketing is against the law. Draeger quietly attempts to convince him it's a foolish idea, but Evenwrite is obsessed. Draeger gives in and wishes him luck. Evenwrite leaves, followed shortly after by Draeger. As he closes up, Teddy marvels to himself at Draeger's impressive calmness and watchfulness.

Then follows a lengthy section focused on Evenwrite, who sits in a steaming bath nursing a cold and recalling his childhood. The only thing he learned from his drunken, hotheaded lumberman of a father was the importance and power of a union. Evenwrite recalls how he became more and more deeply involved with the administration of the local union. He resents the university educated Draeger, who doesn't know the way a union works the way he does. A brief visit from his sleepy four-year-old son interrupts Evenwrite's train of thought. After the boy goes back to bed, Evenwrite drifts off to sleep, his father's angry pro-union rhetoric echoing in his dreams.

The following day, Evenwrite sets up his picket, but is sabotaged by Hank's calling of a news crew and arranging for Indian Jenny to walk alongside the picket line with a sign indicating that she's married to one of the men. The picket goes down that night. The next day Evenwrite and the men from the picket line meet to plan a sabotage attempt on the Stamper's logging operation, but when they put their plan into practice, it fails miserably. Evenwrite and two other men have to be rescued from the rushing river by Hank and Joe-Ben. Finally, Evenwrite goes out in the dead of night to spike together the logs Hank had been planning to ship to the logging firm, but finds out the next day that Hank is using the freedom from shipping to focus his efforts on meeting the deadline to have the firm's wood cut. Evenwrite withdraws to the Snag, defeated.

Teddy again watches and listens as the drunken, frustrated Evenwrite concocts an outrageous plan to swim the river and take control of the Stamper place by force. Draeger, under Teddy's increasingly admiring gaze, calmly convinces him that such a plan is impossible and proposes another. Third person narration from Teddy's point of view, observing that fear is what motivates Evenwrite and indeed most people, is interspersed with Draeger unfolding his plan to buy the Stamper family business. Evenwrite protests that Hank will never sell, but Draeger says there is no other option. After answering several questions from the excited crowd, Draeger leaves, taking Evenwrite with him. Outside, Draeger tells Evenwrite that what he was really doing was getting the crowd to BELIEVE he was going to suggest that Hank sell. When Evenwrite says he doesn't understand, Draeger invites him back to his hotel room to play cribbage. Teddy watches them go in the direction OPPOSITE to the Stamper place, thinks admiring thoughts about Draeger, and imagines that he (Draeger) wanted him (Teddy) to know that he was staging a ruse. "[Teddy's] initial admiration and awe swells to love and beyond - to adulation, to worship."

Chapter 7 Analysis

The prologue to this chapter is a metaphoric description of Draeger's actions here and throughout the book, as he attempts to transmute the "poison" of Hank's actions and the town's hatred of those actions into something that will ultimately end the dispute and benefit the town.

There are several manifestations and/or developments of the water metaphor in this section. The first is in the appearance of the rain, which represents the way Hank's relationship with the town is shifting in ways over which he has no control. The

metaphor functions in a similar fashion for Evenwrite as he's almost carried away by the increasingly hurried river in the same way as he's being emotionally carried away by the townspeople, themselves in an increasing and angry hurry to get the situation with the Stampers settled. Meanwhile, a very different aspect of the metaphor can be seen in Evenwrite's long bath, which can be interpreted as a representation of how sudden calm and insight can occur in just as unpredictable a fashion as sudden upheaval and upset.

The insight gained by Evenwrite develops one of the novel's important secondary themes exploring the relationships between fathers and sons. The way Evenwrite's life and perspective are dominated by memories of his father parallels the way Hank's and Lee's lives are both dominated by the influence of their father (Henry). In specific terms, this dominance foreshadows Henry's dominance over Hank in Chapter 9, dominance that results in life-changing circumstances for Hank, Henry, Joe-Ben and Lee. Meanwhile, the brief scene between Evenwrite and HIS son serves as a reminder of the way one generation, perhaps unwittingly, passes on the prejudices and opinions of the previous one. This minor theme is ultimately a manifestation of the play's overall theme, relating to the way the past defines the present. It's important to note here that, while Evenwrite has a son, neither Hank nor Lee does. Does this mean that for the next generation of Stampers, the hatred and desire for vengeance will be over? The novel isn't clear on the subject. In any case, the father/son motif manifests again in Chapter 8, with the introduction of a secondary plot involving a citizen of the town and his fraudulent plan to provide for his illegitimate son.

Once again, Hank's feisty, angry independence can be seen as a double-sided comment on the so-called American Dream, first introduced as a secondary thematic subject in Chapter 1. The individual's fight for "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness" is dramatized in Hank's insistent and spirited resistance to Draeger's proposals. The core action and conflict of the novel, however, is built on the premise that to at least some degree Hank's pursuit of this right is putting him in direct conflict that's damaging the rights of others in the town to pursue the same dream. It's important to note that the novel seems to avoid coming down on one side or the other of the question - it never suggests that Hank is wholly admirable or wholly despicable. What it does, however, is present the perspective that there is a dark side to the American Dream, a potentially corruptive and destructive dark side.

Chapter 8, Part 1

Chapter 8, Part 1 Summary

The prologue for this chapter is written in first person, with the narrator recalling nights in his childhood when he was troubled by sounds coming from the hall and later discovered they were being made by a rat trying to crack open a walnut. The narrator also recalls flashes of a light from outside that reminds him of "something flying round and around the house looking for a place to get in."

The chapter itself begins with descriptions of the continuing rain and of the large flocks of Canada geese flying south for the winter. Narrative also describes how the people of the town dread the coming hardships of the season, which they believe will be made even harder by Hank's refusal to stop scabbing. The narrative then changes focus and explores the situation of Willard Eggleston, who owns both the town movie theatre and the town Laundromat, who has had a secret black mistress for years by whom he fathered a son. He sends them a steadily dwindling support payment. Willard reflects on how his mistress has written saying she plans to marry a sailor, whose frequent income will free Willard from the financial the strain of continuing to support her. His frequent absences will also enable them to continue their affair. Willard also reflects on how he wrote back to ask her to hold off for a few more days. He has a plan he's going to put into action that will change their lives for good.

An excerpt from a letter Lee is writing to his ex-colleague serves as a transition into this chapter's next section, written first from Lee's point of view in first person past tense and then in Hank's first person past tense. They both comment on the numbers and the loud honking of the flocks of geese flying by, with Hank referring to his wish that he could fly just like them. Hank then narrates how he called all the Stamper relatives together, how more than ever before (even for Christmas parties) showed up, and how unusually happy they all are. He finds Viv massaging liniment into Lee's sore back, and asks what she said to bring so many and make them so pleased. When Viv says she doesn't know, Lee says they're all there and all so happy probably because they heard that Hank was prepared to sell the business. The family is all looking forward to their share of the profit. This can be interpreted as being the result of the ruse played out by Draeger and Evenwrite at the end of the previous chapter. Hank and Lee quickly realize that this is what happened, with Hank becoming increasingly angry and Lee remaining very calm. There is the sense at this point that Hank is angry at more than what's happening with the family. It seems as though he might be getting suspicious of Lee and Viv.

Hank tells the family what he believes has happened, and that instead of receiving their share of proceeds from the sale they'll be going out to work in the forest so the company can meet their deadline. A few members of the family become angry, saying Hank has no right to control their lives the way he does. They demand, as shareholders, in the company, that the question be put to vote. Henry appears, reminds them all that he's got

the greatest majority of shares, that what he says goes. What he says is that the family will go into the forest exactly the way Hank planned. The family disperses, everyone grumbling to everyone else in a way that both reminds Hank of the honking of the passing geese and blends WITH the honking so that the clutter of sound becomes almost unbearable. After the family leaves, Hank goes into the house for dinner, and discovers that Viv has set aside the choicest bits of fried chicken for Lee.

Chapter 8, Part 1 Analysis

The prologue to this chapter can be interpreted in several ways. The fact that it's written in first person, and in language similar to that used by Lee in his letters to his colleague / friend, suggests the possibility that this particular prologue is perhaps part of one of those letters. Meanwhile, the image of the rat trying to crack the nut is evocative of the way Evenwrite and the people of the town are desperate to crack the shell of resistance and determination surrounding Hank and the other Stampers. It's also evocative of the way Lee is trying to crack the shell of Viv's resistance to him and her love for Hank so he can take his revenge on Hank through her. Finally, the speaker's comment about looking for a way to get in can be interpreted on a similar level. The town is trying to find a way to get into Hank's conscience, Lee is trying to find a way to get into Viv's heart, and Lee is also trying to find a way to get into his own heart, and find some peace and a sense of belonging in his own life.

The symbol of the geese is introduced in this section, and is quite overtly defined by Hank's expression of his desire to fly and be free like the geese. Freedom and its destruction are associated with geese throughout the rest of the novel. This is essentially the reason Hank experiences the "honking" of his family in the same way as he experiences the honking of the geese. His family is expressing their increasingly angry desire for freedom in the same way as the geese are expressing the fact that their freedom exists, and is in fact a natural, taken-for-granted part of their existence.

The introduction and development of the Willard Eggleston sub-plot is another of those minor plots, like the ones involving Indian Jenny and Simone the prostitute that plays out in miniature the more large-scale battle being waged in the main plot. In this case, the sub-plot illuminates Henry Stamper's core desire to provide for his son and family, defining both men as being determined to realize that desire at whatever cost. Both Willard and Henry go to extremes in order to ensure good lives for their families, with Willard's deliberately self-destructive actions later in this chapter foreshadowing and illuminating Henry's less deliberate but equally self-destructive actions in Chapter 9.

Chapter 8, Part 2

Chapter 8, Part 2 Summary

In action written in third person past, Willard Eggelston returns home from another bad night at his empty movie theatre, listening to flocks of geese overhead as he goes home, sorts his accounts, studies some papers, and follows through on his secret plans. The nature of those plans isn't clear yet, but there are indications they involve deceiving his wife. At one point, Willard sits and weeps, becoming both sad and angry that he's got nobody to whom he can explain WHY he's weeping. He suddenly realizes he wants to explain to Hank, since he believes that Hank's scabbing ways are the reason he (Willard) and the rest of the town are on such a downward slide. He goes out to call Hank, honking his horn loudly as a kind of taunting of his still-sleeping wife.

At the Stamper House, Lee hears Hank go. Narration shifts into first person past as Lee gets up his nerve and goes into Viv's sitting room to visit her. Their joking greetings soon collapse into silence, and then Viv asks why Lee is actually there. Lee tries to pass it off as a joke, Viv quietly persists, Lee explains that the doesn't really know why he's there, and then suggests that she read the work of a poet he's studying - his words might be able to explain. As Lee's coming back with the book he hears Hank returning, and the conversation ends abruptly.

A while later, Hank and Joe-Ben are having breakfast, Hank's first person past narration indicates that that morning, and indeed that whole day, things felt as though they were going wrong. This is in spite of Joe-Ben's oft-voiced assertion that the day was perfect, and it was the day he was going to bag a goose. Hank's unease deepens as he goes out to the work site, recalling that the numbers of families showing up to work on the lumber contract have been steadily decreasing and then discovering that nobody else is showing up. This leads him to realize there are a great many people, now including his own family, who don't want him to fill the contract with the lumber company. As he's going to inspect the logs he's already cut Joe-Ben becomes excited. There's a single Canadian goose, apparently lost, flying towards them. Joe-Ben sees this as his chance, but Hank points the gun to one side having realized that the goose didn't deserve to be killed just because he was lost.

As Hank's struggles to complete the contract continue, more and more relatives stop working with him. Meanwhile, Lee gets sicker and sicker with an illness that is part genuine flu and part tactic in his plan to get revenge on Hank. At one point Lee is in bed when he hears Hank go into Viv's room where he (Lee) had left the thermometer Lee used to take his temperature sitting on a book of poetry. Lee watches as Hank deliberately breaks the thermometer, taking it as a sign that Hank is coming close to losing control. The next day, Hank and Joe-Ben go out to work, with Hank's reflections on Joe-Ben's unshakeable faith that the contract will be brought in leading him to recall an exactly opposite expression of feeling. He recalls in detail the phone call he got from Willard Eggleston. The dialogue from that phone call includes the information that

Willard just bought a life insurance policy, listed his son by his assistant in the laundry shop as his beneficiary, and that he's planning to kill himself. He adds that he's doing it because Hank, by scabbing and enabling the strike to continue, is making it impossible for anyone in town to make a living. When Hank hangs up, narration shifts to third person past and describes how Willard dies driving his car off an embankment. Narrative shifts focus again to Lee's first person past perspective as Hank receives news of Willard's suicide and reacts with shock, upsetting and confusing Viv and everyone else in the family.

That night, Hank wakes up with a start, feeling there's something wrong. He goes to look out the window to see if the foundation for the house is all right, and is extremely startled to see a horrific face staring at him from outside in the rain. He jumps back, the face does as well, and he realizes he's just been startled by a distorted reflection. Viv wakes up. Hank tells her that he was woken by the combination of a nightmare, the silence left by the passing of the last, giant flock of geese, and concern about the house. Viv calms him down, taking him back to bed and massaging him. Hank becomes aroused, and they make love. As Viv goes back to massaging him, Hank goes back to sleep.

Chapter 8, Part 2 Analysis

There are two important things to note about the Willard Eggleston sub-plot, which both develops and climaxes in this section. The first is the way that development is narrated in the same frequently transitioned style as the main plot, with shifting temporal and personal perspectives. The second is Hank's reaction to Willard's attempt to blame him for his situation. Hank becomes both upset and guilty, but not enough to discontinue his self-righteous determination to work in his way and on his own terms. The irony here is that both Hank and Willard are doing exactly the same thing in providing for their families the best, and only, way they know how.

The symbolic value of geese in this novel is developed further here, but instead of representing freedom as they've done earlier, the lost goose represents freedom's dark side - being too free, having no direction, becoming lost. At first glance, the character who's living the most obvious symbolic parallel with the lost goose is Lee, whom the novel has portrayed to this point as being lost and who has been almost destroyed by his relationship with the family in the way the goose is almost destroyed by Joe-Ben.

Upon closer consideration, however, it becomes possible to see that there is also a parallel between the lost goose and Hank. He's becoming increasingly separated from his family and in danger from being attacked by both Lee and the community (in the form of Evenwrite) in the same way the goose is in danger by Joe-Ben. These two aspects to his experience combine with his self-surprising reaction to Willard's telephone call and death to make him fearfully alone with himself in the same way as the goose. It's a situation which seems to be the source of his horrified reaction to the unexpected face at the window.

This reaction is itself a symbolic representation of his sudden encounter with his conscience, which has been awakened or is about to be awakened by several factors. These include his knowledge of what happened to Willard, the creeping realization that Lee is taking revenge on him through Viv, and perhaps a premonition of what's about to happen to Joe-Ben and Henry as a result of his obsession with winning the lumber battle. The fact that he's awakened by a soaring flock of geese is significant, in that his conscience has in fact been awakened by soaring freedom (i.e. the opportunity to make money through his lumber deal), a freedom that has unpredictably resulted, and continues to result, in destruction. This unpredictability, in turn, is symbolized by the fact that Hank catches this glimpse of his dark side in a reflection distorted by rain, which here again functions as a symbolic manifestation of randomness, chaos, and life's potentially overwhelming volatility.

Chapter 9

Chapter 9 Summary

The prologue for this chapter very briefly describes how people's hopes that the night will bring release from the difficulties of the day end in disappointment.

The morning after the events ending Chapter 8, in narration written from Lee's first person past perspective, Lee refuses to get out of bed and exaggerates the symptoms of his illness so he can be alone with Viv and put his plan of revenge on Hank into action. Joe-Ben gives up and goes downstairs, leaving Lee to be surprised when Viv comes in and teases him into joining the rest of the family for breakfast. As Lee, Hank, Joe-Ben and Viv eat, Henry appears, announcing his intention to go out with Hank and Joe-Ben to guide them in the ways of old-fashioned tree cutting, since they don't have the manpower (i.e. other members of the family) to run the equipment. When they get to the site, they realize they don't have a sufficient number of cotter pins to do the job. Henry goes into town to get the pins, taking Lee with him, because Viv has insisted that he see a doctor.

At this point, narrative perspective begins to shift frequently and rapidly, between Henry's first person present, Lee's first person past, Hank's first person past, and omniscient narrator past. Lee is dropped off at the doctor's, where he receives a penicillin injection from the nurse. Henry goes to get the pins, stopping off at the bar to kill time because he doesn't want to wait in the doctor's office. When he's there Indian Jenny comes in, she and Henry banter with angry meaning, and she concludes the argument as she goes back out with a reference to how the moon will decide what happens to him. This triggers a sudden thought in Henry. He races back to Hank and Joe-Ben, telling them that because the moon is full, the coming high tide will combine with the continuing rain to make the river so high and so fast that sending their logs down to the sawmill will be impossible. He tells them they need to work together and fast to get enough logs down to the river at just the right moment so the tide will work in their favor. Hank, all too happy (and relieved) to let someone else take control for a change, follows his father's lead.

Lee, meanwhile, grows tired of waiting for Henry to come and collect him and starts walking home, his anger at the indignities he suffered at the doctor's office (he fainted when he received his penicillin injection) fueling his anger at Hank and increasing his determination for revenge. This parallels the increasing determination of Henry, Hank and Joe-Ben to accomplish their goals, the increasing efficiency and speed of their work, and the increasing risk of danger.

As Lee is nearing the river, there is an accident in the woods. A tree falls in the wrong direction, crushing Henry's arm, bruising Hank severely, and carrying Joe-Ben with it down into the water, where it falls on his legs and traps him beneath the rising tide. Hank, unable to lift the log and unable to leave, keeps Joe-Ben company as the water

slowly rises. Their jokes and reminiscences become increasingly desperate, until finally the water rises above Joe-Ben's mouth. Hank desperately takes mouthfuls of air down to him, exhaling into his mouth before going back up for more. Joe-Ben's thoughts become more incoherent and, perhaps strangely, more joyful. Hank comes to the surface to take a big breath and is about to go back under to breathe it into Joe when "a bubbling of hysterical mirth erupted in [his] face ... it startled him so he lost his lungful of air." In other words, beneath the surface of the water Joe-Ben laughs, breathes out his air, takes in lungfulls of water, and drowns.

Hank nails Joe-Ben's clothes to the log, planning that when the log floats down the river Joe-Ben's body will float with it and be retrieved. He feels the log start to rise with the tide, and comments in narration that "... if Joe could have hung on another twenty minutes or so ..." He then runs back to Henry, helps him into the truck and takes him into town to the hospital. Lee, meanwhile, makes it back to the house and to the door to Viv's sitting room. He goes in, they make small talk, and Lee tells what happened in the office. Viv tells him that Henry was so afraid of needles that on one occasion, when he was about to receive an injection, he both wet and soiled himself. They laugh long and loud at this image, and then fall silent.

Back in town, Hank pulls up outside the hospital only to notice that Henry's arm has fallen off completely. He takes his father inside, hands him over to the doctor for treatment, and hurries away, aware of a nagging feeling that he has to take care of something at home. Back at the house, both Viv and Lee seem to want to make love. However, Lee's courage fails him, and he goes back into his room, berating himself for being the same kind of coward he's always been. He crawls into bed feeling completely humiliated and weak. Hank, meanwhile, arrives at the riverbank and instead of signaling that he wants someone to come over and ferry him across, he decides to swim. His strength and courage contrast with Lee's weakness and fear.

Hank's swim and his determination to continue to be strong are narrated in parallel to Viv's coming to Lee's room, their making love, and Lee's realizing that by being weak, he's ultimately accomplished what he could NOT accomplish through what he thought was strength (see "Quotes" - Hank, Chapter 3, p. 111). As Lee and Viv make love, Lee realizes that the light that has usually seeped into his room from Viv's sitting room has been blocked, and assumes that Hank is watching. After they finished, Lee and Viv are both overcome by the intensity of the experience, with Lee in particular realizing that he both loves Viv too much and wants to hurt Hank too much to resist taking things even further. "Never give an inch, as they say." He tells Viv he loves her and attempts to convince her to leave Hank and move back east with him. Viv hesitates, saying she doesn't know who or what she loves any more. A silence falls between them, interrupted by groans and the sound of retching from down the hall. Viv runs out to take care of Hank. Lee is slower to get dressed, realizing as he does so that he's formulating exactly the right magic words to invoke the power he believes he's just taken by sleeping with his hated brother's wife - his opportunity to become Captain Marvel (see Chapter 3) has come. He goes down the hall and begins to say the taunting words he's just come up with, but Viv interrupts him with the news Hank has just passed on - that Joe-Ben is dead and Henry is in the hospital.

Hank struggles to tell Lee what he has just realized - a lesson similar to what Lee has just realized, that there is strength in weakness. At the same moment, Lee (in HIS first person past narration) realizes that his new power is a complete illusion - that instead of turning himself into another Captain Marvel, he has instead created in himself another Billy Batson. Back in his first person past narration, Hank confesses that he's learned from Lee the importance of allowing weakness and vulnerability to take its course.

Chapter 9 Analysis

This chapter, while not the climax of the novel, contains several turning points that send the action inevitably in that direction. These include Lee's visit to the doctor's office and his subsequent reflections on his past, the logging accident, Lee making love with Viv, Hank's swim across the river, and Lee's realization about the truth of his Captain Marvel fantasies. These various movements all propel the characters and action towards the climactic fistfight between Lee and Hank in Chapter 11. However, while the narrative climax of the novel is still a chapter or so away, this chapter does contain its thematic and/or symbolic climaxes.

The first of these is the death of Joe-Ben. As previously discussed, water and several of its manifestations (the river, the rain, Evenwrite's bath) symbolize the randomness and sudden changeability of life. Joe-Ben's death by drowning represents the way that individuals can in fact be overcome and destroyed by such sudden shifts. Later in the chapter, Hank's determination to swim across the river rather than wait to be ferried across represents his determination to not be overcome and destroyed by those same kinds of shifts. His determination here foreshadows his determination to not give in to the desires of the town and give up his scabbing, and his determination not to surrender to Lee. Another manifestation of the water symbol can be found in Henry's sudden realization of the way the fortunes of his lumber business depend upon the tide (i.e. the flow of water in the river).

The second thematic climax found in this chapter is the key realization by both Lee and Hank that in weakness is strength. From two different perspectives, they realize that there are circumstances in which results are best achieved not by forcing, or attempting to force, those results into being. They learn instead that one can draw closer to one's goals by going with the flow, being watchful and attentive of circumstances and learning to utilize them effectively. Hank's realization of this truth is foreshadowed by his decision to let the tide rise with Joe-Ben's body rather than fight to bring the body to the surface, he (literally) goes with the flow. The realization itself, however, comes only after he sees Lee and Viv making love, and realizes that by being submissive Lee has actually become dominant. His determined swim across the river suggests that force and strength can at times triumph over randomness (as represented, as always throughout this novel, by the water). However, the much more personally affecting experience of seeing Lee and Viv together teaches him that the capacity for vulnerability and weakness is potentially powerful, not to mention destructive.

For Lee, the realization of the power of submissiveness comes as no less of a surprise, but for him is much more satisfying than it is for Hank. He triumphs, whereas Hank is humiliated. This is not to say that his triumph is complete. He realizes that the Captain Marvel, instant-hero aspect of his fantasies has essentially been a false hope, that his magic words have failed him and he is still, and will always be, the child whose power is an unknown word away.

There are two minor but still significant symbols in this chapter. Lee waiting for Henry to come represents his lifetime of waiting for affection for his father, while Henry working with Hank symbolizes what he's done the whole time Lee was waiting. He's focusing on the son he understood and identified with, his kindred spirit as opposed to being with the son who perhaps has an even greater need for his love and attention.

Chapter 10

Chapter 10 Summary

The prologue to this chapter speaks poetically of the aftermath of an explosion - how the actual incident has less effect than its lingering after-effects.

The day after the accident, the rain stops. For a few days the sunshine continues, humidity increases as some of the water left by the rain evaporates, and people all over town get ready for Joe-Ben's funeral in their own ways. Indian Jenny tries to meditate her way out of long echoing memories of her experience with Henry, Teddy has what he thinks is his last conversation with Draeger, and Boney Stokes (Henry's old school rival) parks himself by a window in the Snag so he can watch the funeral procession. At the same time, Evenwrite wonders to himself why he isn't happy about the way things have turned out. Narration reveals that the day after the accident, Hank let it be known that the contract he'd been striving to fill hadn't been met, which means that the strike is over. Also, Simone gets an anonymous gift of a pretty new dress. In spite of having promised herself never again to take the gifts of the men who enjoyed her company, she finds herself sorely tempted to put it on.

In the Snag, Biggy Newton wonders whom he's going to fight now that his oldest and best rival (Hank) has retreated, and Les Gibbons drunkenly and openly rejoices in Hank's defeat. All this is interspersed with narration of Hank and Viv making their way to the funeral, and Hank's first person reflections on what he knows about Viv and Lee and how he's not going to talk about it.

The funeral, which takes place on the day before Thanksgiving, is narrated by Hank in first person past. He reflects on his surprise at seeing so many there, and also on how the Joe-Ben he sees in the casket is nothing like the Joe-Ben he knew in life. After the funeral, Hank goes to see Henry in the hospital, only to find that Boney Stokes has beaten him there and is taking barely disguised delight in Henry's troubles. Hank becomes forgotten and ends up behind a curtain, watching as the two old men bicker, banter, and argue about the death of Henry's mother. Henry makes Boney angry by being able to open a can of chewing tobacco and taking himself a plug with only one arm. They argue, Boney starts to leave, Henry comments that he wishes Hank and Joe-Ben were there to tell him what the plan of action was. Both Hank and Boney realize Henry doesn't know that Joe-Ben is dead. Boney tells him, his words dripping with artificial sympathy. He then goes and Hank tries to talk to Henry, but Henry dozes off into a morphine-influenced semi-sleep.

Hank goes to the Snag, where people seem glad to see him. He drinks a couple of scotches but doesn't stay long. After he's gone Les Gibbons brags about how tough he (Les) is, and is challenged to a fight by a drunken Biggy Newton. The bar falls silent as everyone turns to watch what happens. Les realizes that he's in over his head and backs down. As Biggy goes back to his table and Les realizes how he's humiliated

himself, the narrative intersperses Henry's first person recollections of how tough he was as a young man. There's also a narrative of how he struggles to get out of bed but is subdued by nurses. Back at the Snag Simone, dressed in her fancy new dress and having abandoned all pretenses at modesty and purity, comes in and asks who will buy her a bottle of beer.

Chapter 10 Analysis

The prologue to this chapter suggests that the various explosions in the lives of Hank and the other Stampers (Joe-Ben's death, Hank's discovery of Viv and Lee's adultery, Henry's loss of an arm) are all less important in their overall lives than what they experience afterwards. This refers to the events of both this chapter and the next. In terms of this chapter, the emotional and spiritual condition of the various Stampers is illuminated by the actions and reactions of secondary characters, as is the case throughout the novel. Specifically, the humiliation experienced by Les Gibbons and by Simone suggests that Hank and Henry are, and have been, humiliated by what's happened. For Hank, this means having had to give in to the demands of the strikers and having been cuckolded by his weakling younger brother. For Henry, this means having to give in to the strikers and having lost an arm. All these circumstances are the result of seemingly random events, represented here as they are throughout the novel by water. In other words, as the rain / chaos retreats, the physical, emotional and spiritual debris it's left behind becomes apparent. The following chapter, the novel's final one, details the reactions of the characters as they pick their way through that debris and attempt to discover what can be salvaged and/or rebuilt from their lives.

Chapter 11

Chapter 11 Summary

The prologue for this final chapter is a lengthy one, telling (in first person past from the point of view of a psychiatrist) the story of a man named Siggs who was a patient in a mental hospital, got treatment, was released, and who encountered the psychiatrist much later by chance. Siggs tells the psychiatrist he's made peace with himself and with other people, and it's tine to make peace with the "other." He doesn't define what the "other" is, and the psychiatrist leaves the conversation wondering if Siggs is saner or crazier than before. The psychiatrist says "I decided he was."

The action of this chapter takes place on Thanksgiving Day, and begins with the people of the town, including Biggie Newton, Les Gibbons, Viv, and Evenwrite all recovering from the events of the night before. For her part, Jenny is fortune telling, tossing a series of shells onto her bed in the hopes that they will take the shape of the new man in her life. She continues this process throughout the chapter. Meanwhile, the details of Willard Eggleston's insurance scam are coming clear, and it's also becoming clear it's not going to pay out in the way he planned. Also, Simone puts her little statue of the Virgin Mary (the sign of her purity) into the back of her closet, and one of the musicians from the Snag goes a bit mad, destroying his guitar and deliberately dunking his hands in a pot of boiling water.

At the moment of the dunking, Lee awakens. Narration reveals that he had left the house the night of his having slept with Viv and moved into the hotel, where he has been for three days, holed up with a succession of murder mysteries. When he emerges (in time to see the burned-hands musician having locked himself in a phone booth and being rescued by the Sheriff), he is under-slept, unshaved and unwashed. He goes to visit Henry and finds him completely delirious. Lee leaves after a few minutes, encountering the doctor and Boney Stokes, who with barely concealed gloating mockery taunt him about his plans to go back east, and tell him Henry had an insurance policy on him that when he dies (which will be soon) will provide Lee with five thousand dollars. They then offer Lee and the rest of the family all the fixings for a Thanksgiving dinner - turkey, cranberries, potatoes, the works - along with their condolences on the death of Joe-Ben and their good wishes to be passed on to Hank and Viv. Stokes even arranges for his grandson to drive Lee back to the house. Lee agrees, realizing that this might be his one last chance to see Viv.

The narrative begins to insert interjections from Hank's first person present point of view which reveal his awareness of everything that passed between Lee and Viv, his smoldering anger and resentment, and his increasing inclinations towards physically beating Lee. All these are concealed in Lee's third person past tense narrative of his encounter with Viv when she ferries him across the river (at which point she tells him she can't leave with him) and with Hank when he comes into the house (at which point they're barely civil). During this conversation, Lee reveals that he's come to find the

insurance policy. Viv goes up to the attic to look for it; Lee follows her, and while they're alone begs her to leave with him. She insists that she can't, and then tells him to look for the shoebox of papers in which she put the policy. They both search the attic, and Lee finds a photo album containing several of Hank's old pictures, including one Viv looking very beautiful as she holds one of the many young Stamper cousins on the beach. Tearfully he asks her one more time to leave with him, and just as tearfully, she refuses. Their conversation is overheard by Hank, who calmly tells them that he feels well enough to ferry Lee back across the river. Viv watches from the window as they go to the boat.

At that point narration, still mostly from Lee's third person past point of view, adds longer sections in Hank's first person present point of view as they make it across the river and seem about to part politely. However, Hank's temper gets the better of him as Lee tells him of the offer of Thanksgiving dinner and of Stokes' offer to resume regular deliveries of food. All Hank has to do is go back to the old system - hang a flag from the flagpole to let Stokes know what to ferry across. Tension builds to the point that finally, with both men fully aware that Viv is watching them from a window in the attic, Hank and Lee beat the crap out of each other. They're both surprised at how insistently Lee fights back. For a moment, they both believe that Hank is going to kill him. They suddenly stop, agree that they've had enough, shake hands and part.

Lee goes to the Snag, where to fill the time while he's waiting for his bus looks through the photo albums. He discovers a bundle of letters written from his mother to Hank in which she repeatedly asks him for money and which also indicate that she always got it, meaning that Lee is indebted to Hank in a way he immediately and intently despises Meanwhile, back at the house, Hank is invigorated by his fight with Lee. He makes arrangements with Andy, the one member of the family still talking to him, to rent a tugboat and tow the logs down to the mill. He's going to attempt to fulfill the contract. At the same time he's preparing food to take with him, he hears from Andy that Stokes is across the river asking for a flag to let him know what to bring. Hank takes Henry's arm, which had been preserved in the freezer, and prepares it to hang out on the flagpole in the configuration described in Chapter 1 - giving the so-called "one finger salute.:" At the same time, he gives Viv permission to go away with Lee, and tells Andy to take her across the river. Viv, unable to believe what's going on, lets herself be ferried. By the time she arrives at the Snag, Lee has finished the letters. He realizes that if he were to go away, he'd be handing Hank the victory he's always wanted - to be rid of Lee for good. He decides he's not going to give him the satisfaction and runs out of the bar, leaving his bus ticket and the photo album with Viv.

Evenwrite receives a phone call that Hank is attempting to move the logs. He places a call to Draeger, and the narrative begins to make clear that it's moving towards the scene at the beginning of the novel - Draeger arriving at the house, being shouted at by Evenwrite, and seeing the arm hanging from the flagpole.

The face of the new man in Indian Jenny's life is coming clear. Viv, as she looks through the photo album and in particular at the picture of her when she was younger, realizes

that the loving Someone she's been searching for all her life is neither Lee nor Hank, and decides to leave town for good.

Lee joins Hank on the tugboat, and together they wrestle with the logs. The scene from the beginning of the novel is sketched in, concluding with Draeger arriving at the bar. It becomes clear that the previous chapters are a summary of the stories Viv told Draeger as they looked through the album. Viv goes out to get on her bus, telling a curious child that she doesn't know where she's going, she's just going. As she drives past the river, she sees the water propelling a collection of logs, along with two tiny figures (Hank and Lee) down its course. Finally, Indian Jenny greets her new lover.

Chapter 11 Analysis

The ambivalent ending of the prologue to this chapter, which never makes it clear whether the psychiatrist thinks his ex-patient is sane or crazy, is evocative of the novel's thematically ambivalent attitude towards its characters, particularly Hank and Lee. Their similar determinations to not let themselves be beaten (Hank by the river and the community, Lee by Hank) might, on the one hand, be interpreted as admirable - further manifestations of the previously referenced "American Dream." On the other hand, their actions in this chapter are also grounded in their ongoing, deeply felt and potentially self-destructive mutual resentment and hatred. From that perspective, their battle on the dock is not in fact an ending, but a beginning. Yes, they finally give free reign to their feelings for each other, but there is the sense as the action of this chapter progresses that the dock battle is only the first of what will probably be a life long series of skirmishes, one-upmanships, and competitions.

This idea is reinforced by the novel's structure, which brings the story to its end by taking the reader back to its beginning (Draeger's sighting of the arm on the flagpole and his consequent encounter with Viv). Once again, structure and theme reinforce each other. There is one final point to note about this simultaneous end/beginning, and that relates to the image of the arm and the finger. As the novel concludes it's possible to see that the image represents not only Hank and his family giving the community "the finger" (to coin a phrase), It also represents Hank and Lee giving each other "the finger," Viv giving both of THEM the finger, and perhaps even represents the novelist giving the reader the finger. In this ending, there is the clear suggestion that there are no happy endings - the desire and determination to destroy and confront, which fuels Lee and Hank and Henry alike (like father, like sons), is just as likely to dominate an individual's life as the desire to survive and transcend (i.e. Viv).

There are two important points to note in this context. The first is the novel's previously discussed ambivalence, in that it makes no statement one way or the other about the relative "goodness" or "badness" of this development in their relationship. The second, however, is that Viv is not ambivalent - she realizes that because neither of the men is able to get past their determination to not be beaten, she is never going to be as special or as important to either of them as she needs to be. Consequently, she gets out. It's possible to see here that everything that's happened in the novel to this point has on

one level been part of Viv's thought/emotion process. As she's reflected on the story of her "family," presumably describing events and circumstances to Draeger as she guides him through the photo albums, she's putting the pieces of her past life together to create the picture that because of her love for Hank and her need to be loved she's been unable to see. She's simply not a priority. The repeated motif of Indian Jenny casting the fortune-telling stones again and again reinforces this idea. She's searching for HER true "someone," in the same way Viv is, drawing closer and closer to discovering "his" identity. The difference between the two women is that Indian Jenny's lover is a man, while Viv discovers that the only source of true, genuine love in her life is herself.

The relationship between Indian Jenny's actions and Viv's again develop the sense that events in the lives of minor characters illuminate those in the lives of the principals. Additional examples include the way Willard's plans for providing for his illegitimate son through insurance fraud come to naught, as do Simone's plans for starting a new moral life. These two incidents are ironic commentaries on Lee's failed determination to transcend his resentment of his brother, and his equally failed determination to take revenge on him. In these various circumstances can be found the meaning of the novel's title. Sometimes, "great notions" like Lee's plans for revenge and/or transcendence, Hank's plans to conquer the town and to fulfill the contract, Willard's plans to provide for his son, Evenwrite's plans to break the spirit of the Stampers, Draeger's plans to end the strike, and Simone's plans to live a moral life all come to nothing. Sometimes "great notions" like Viv's impulsive dash to freedom come at just the right time and can be fulfilled in just the right ways. It all depends, the novel seems to suggest, on which way the river (of life) flows.

Characters

Hank Stamper

Hank is one of the two central characters in the novel, both of whom can be described as "anti-heroes." These types of characters are protagonists whose personalities are defined not only by more traditionally "heroic" traits such as loyalty, honesty, integrity, commitment and/or courage, but also by negative traits such as ruthlessness, aggression, selfishness, insensitivity and/or greed. Hank exhibits all these traits, both positive and negative. He displays the positive ones when it comes to his determination to follow through on his personal goals, which are in line with the traditional goals of his family. This is because his family and its goals are his central source of definition as a human being - it's important to note here that he lives in a house surrounded by family members, works with his family, socializes with his family, and does everything he does in the name of his family. That being said, he displays the negative traits, however, when it comes to ACTING on that determination. In other words, he is not an altruistic hero - he does not do what he does for the greater good, but for the immediate good of himself and his immediate circle. In that sense, he is definitely his father's son, and his brother's brother. All three of these Stamper men exhibit similar tendencies and attitudes. A key difference between Hank and Lee is that Hank, unlike most traditional "heroes," does not undergo some kind of transformation through the course of the novel, but remains essentially unchanged. He makes an important discovery (that being the possibility that there is in fact strength in weakness) but in spite of making that discovery, his essential attitudes and beliefs, as well as the actions arising from them, are as they were at the beginning of the novel.

Leland (Lee) Stamper

Lee is Hank Stamper's younger half-brother - they share a father, but have different mothers. Like Hank, Lee is something of an anti-hero, in that he has many positive characteristics (including sensitivity, compassion, and a degree of loyalty to his family), but also exhibits several of the negatives apparent in his brother and his father. What's important to note is that these negatives are not as immediately apparent as they are in Hank or Henry. Only as the story of the novel progresses does it become clear that the three men have more in common than perhaps Lee would like, or that all three are aware of. This is only one of several differences between the two men, most of which are grounded in their educational backgrounds. While Hank lives his life in his hands and in his heart, in a world of hard work and passionate impulse (or impulsive passion), Lee essentially lives his life in his head, in a world of ideas and theories and imaginings. At the core of his existence, beneath even his desire for revenge and his anger at his family, is an intense, desperate loneliness. He is very much an individual, where Hank is very much part of a group, or community. How much of Lee's desire to belong, somewhere, anywhere, triggers his decision by the end of the novel to stay with his

family, even if it means continuing his rivalry with Hank? The novel never answers the question, but it is nonetheless present in its conclusion.

Henry Stamper

Henry is the father of both Hank and Lee. Through most of the novel, he exists on the periphery of the action, as a catalyst or comic relief. In Chapter 1, there is a brief portrayal of Henry as a young man, and in particular of the self-serving insensitivity that has so many repercussions in the life of his sons, triggering the growth and development of a similar sort of insensitivity in Hank and simultaneously triggering long simmering resentment and need in Lee. The most important aspect of this character, however, is in the appearance of his severed arm at the beginning and the end of the novel. In fact, it's not his arm so much as it is his finger, extended in the famous "one finger salute" that embodies and symbolizes the attitude of the entire Stamper family towards the town, and the world.

Viv Stamper

Viv is Hank's wife, a troubled, vulnerable, bird-like soul caged within the home and the aggressive, competitive spirit of the Stamper family in the same way as the bird given to her by Hank is caged within wires and mesh. The difference between Viv and the bird, however, is that the bird is still able to sing. Metaphorically, Viv's voice is essentially silent. Her soul doesn't sing, her essential goodness of spirit is for the most part overwhelmed by all the Stamper-ness around her. There are two exceptions to this. The first is in the little 1s she puts into the lunches of the various Stamper men (Chapter 4). These can be seen as embodying the loving generosity of her spirit longing for at least some form of expression. Having been denied the joy of children (the reasons and even the timing of the death of her baby are never clearly defined), this aspect of her personality can only find expression in her desserts - and eventually in her brief but profoundly catalytic affair with Lee, which changes her life.

Joe-Ben Stamper

Hank and Lee's good-hearted and generous minded cousin serves essentially as a character of contrast. Joe-Ben's uncomplicated approach to life, work, his family and his spiritual life are all markedly different from the multi-layered, complexly motivated drives that define the actions of Hank and Lee. The writing describing his death (Chapter 9) are among the most powerful in the novel, in that they not only describe the tragic, avoidable death of one of the most well rounded, humanist characters in the book. They are also starkly evocative of the horrific, sudden randomness with which death can strike.

Draeger

This character takes focus at the novel's beginning and at its end, appearing occasionally throughout. He is a union negotiator, sent to get Hank and the Stampers to call off their strike-and-union breaking activities. In spite of his being something of a hypochondriac, he is nevertheless clever and manipulative, but finds himself outmaneuvered at every turn by the wily determination of Henry, Hank and the other Stampers.

Floyd Evenwrite

Floyd carries with him a decade's old grudge against the Stamper family, and throughout the novel is determined to get the better of them in whatever way he can. This leads him to increasingly desperate, almost foolish measures as the novel progresses. The irony in this character is that he shares several characteristics with the Stampers, particularly with Hank. As was discussed in relation to Chapter 7, the adult lives of both Hank and Evenwrite have been shaped by their being the child of aggressive, dominating fathers.

Indian Jenny

This secondary character is essentially a symbolic one, as are many of the novel's secondary characters (descriptions of three others follow). The essential purpose of all these characters is to echo, and therefore illuminate, the experiences and actions of the Stampers. In Jenny's case, her sense of being both lost and aimless echoes similar circumstances in the lives of Viv and Lee. At the same time, her long festering grudge against Henry (the source of which is never explicitly defined, but there are hints it was the result of a relationship gone sour) carries with it echoes of Lee's similar grudge with both Henry and Hank.

Simone

Simone is an attractive woman nearing middle age who has given sexual favors to men in exchange for gifts, but never for money. Being Roman Catholic and ostensibly quite religious, she tells herself she is not a prostitute, since being one would be a sin. Through the course of the novel, however, as several of the characters (particularly Lee and Viv) abandon the illusions that have defined their lives to this point, Simone too abandons her illusions, and accepts the fact that she truly IS a prostitute. In short, as is the case with Indian Jenny and other minor characters, this character's experience echoes and illuminates that of the principal characters.

Willard Eggleston

Willard is a small businessman in the small town near where the Stampers work and where they do their business. In the same way as other businessmen and other town citizens, Willard's economic life is being profoundly and painfully disrupted by the Stampers' continued scabbing - in short, as long as the Stampers continue to work, the unionized lumbermen are OUT of work, and can't feed their families. In Willard's case, he has a secret family to feed, and when it becomes clear he's not going to be able to meet his obligations, he commits insurance fraud. In his story can be seen a parallel to Henry's, in that both men are determined to provide for their sons, both men go to extreme measures to ensure they accomplish their goals, and both men are ultimately destroyed. Willard loses his life, and Hank essentially loses his ability to work, the one aspect to his life that has essentially defined all the others.

Teddy the Bartender

This character works at the Snag, the local bar which is the site of several confrontations between the Stampers and the community. As such, he's a witness to several flavors of determination - of the Stampers to not be intimidated, of Floyd Evenwrite to bring the Stampers down, and of Draeger to not let himself be bested by either the Stampers or Evenwrite. Draeger particularly captures Teddy's imagination and attention, and it's in the relationship between these two characters that Teddy's parallel experience to the central characters, similar to that of other minor characters, appears. Specifically, Teddy embodies and symbolizes the admiration, either grudging or willing, that various Stampers have for each other - Hank for Henry, Lee for Hank and Henry and Joe-Ben, Joe-Ben for Henry and Hank. Specifically, Teddy's silent admiration of Draeger parallels Lee's reluctant admiration of Hank and perhaps even Hank's subconscious admiration of Lee's intellectual accomplishment.

Objects/Places

The Old Stamper Place

This is the home of the Stamper family, where several domestic scenes including confrontation, recognition, reconciliation, revelation, and plain old mealtimes take place. Its ramshackle construction, in that it's held together with rope and bloody mindedness, repaired with barrel staves and determination, represents the ramshackle way in which the family itself is held together. The way it's perched precariously on the constantly eroded banks of a volatile river represents the way the will and success of the family is constantly being eroded by citizens of the town. The fact that the house is still standing at the end of the novel symbolically parallels the way Hank and Lee continue to strive to achieve the family's dream - as long as the house still stands, so does the family.

The "Never Give A Inch" Sign

The sign was originally a picture of Jesus, but was painted over in garish colors by Hank, whose actions represent the family's determination to live according to the demands of success and their dreams rather than according to the Biblical admonitions of compassion and turning the other cheek. It is essentially the family motto, overtly followed by Hank and Henry from the beginning, adopted by Lee as he becomes increasingly desperate for revenge, and also adopted by Viv when she finally realizes that her true self is being stifled by life with the Stampers - she's given too many inches, and the time has come to stop. There is irony in this sign in that other, non-Stampers also follow its principles. This is particularly true of Floyd Evenwrite, and of Draeger.

The Snag

This is the local bar, and is the setting for several confrontations between the Stampers and the community in which they live and work. As such it embodies the community and its attitudes.

Molly the Dog / The Bear

These two animals play out a hunter/hunted relationship similar to that played out on several levels throughout the novel, and between several characters. Hank and Lee are each both hunter and hunted, Lee is hunter and Viv is hunted, the Stampers are hunted while Evenwrite and Draeger are the hunters. The fear in Molly, who is hunter but fears she is hunted, echoes the ambiguous, two-headed fears of all these other characters.

Echoes

Echoes appear throughout the novel, in several manifestations. First of these is the literal echo awakened by the shouting logger (Chapter 3), which heralds a series of poetic and metaphoric references to the way the past "echoes" in the present, making its presence felt in both memory and action.

The River

The river is one of two principal manifestations of the novel's core symbol - water, which represents the power and changeability of nature, of feeling, and of circumstance. Both the Stampers' living and their home are dependent upon surviving, predicting and controlling the power of the river, which is a constant threat but which is nevertheless constantly and effectively managed by the Stampers - for the most part.

Rain

The rain is the second of the two principal manifestations of the novel's core symbol of water. The rain appears later in the novel, beginning in Chapter 7 and ending in Chapter 10, a relatively long time in the lives and experiences of the characters. This represents and embodies the way change can be a long time developing. Meanwhile, the fact that Joe-Ben loses his life as the result of the rain increasing the speed and depth of the river is a symbolic manifestation of the way that the Stampers' survival and management of the river/rain/water is, in fact, an illusion.

Geese

Geese, as previously discussed in relation to several chapters, represent and embody freedom - the joy of it (Hank, Henry, Joe-Ben), the desperation for it (Viv, Lee) and the dangers of it when too much freedom somewhere, somehow transforms into being lost.

The Thermometer

(Chapter 8)

This symbolizes the increasing heat/attraction between Lee and Viv, and also the increasing heat/stress/jealousy in Hank. His apparently deliberate breaking of it foreshadows and represents the breaking down of his sense of self control, when he discovers the relationship between Lee and Viv.

Henry's Arm

Henry's arm, severed in a lumbering accident in Chapter 9, appears suspended from a flagpole at the beginning and at the end of the novel. At the beginning the middle finger of its hand is extended in the familiar "one finger salute." When it reappears at the end, it becomes clear that Hank has deliberately displayed the arm and finger in this way as a representation of the family's dismissal of the town and its attitudes toward his family.

Social Sensitivity

Ken Kesey's friend Ken Babbs once remarked, "A man should have the right to be as big as he feels it's in him to be." So taken was Kesey with Babbs's comment that he quoted it in Sometimes a Great Notion. Babbs's observation reveals the novel's primary social concern: that self-reliance must not be destroyed by a collectivist force, in this case a logging union. In the Emersonian tradition, Kesey advocates rebellion against pressures to conform.

Evoking his favorite mythic hero, the cowboy, Kesey creates first in Henry Stamper, then in his son Hank, and ultimately in his younger son Lee the frontier blend of independence, courage, irrepressible determination, and ardent defense of personal freedom that the writer so admires.

Techniques

Sometimes a Great Notion is a highly complex novel in its time scheme, point of view, and imagery. The panoramic narrative begins and ends on Thanksgiving Day of 1961; but between its starting point and its conclusion, it moves back and forth in time to depict the lives of three generations of Stamper males, with the earliest events occurring in 1898. As Tony Tanner explains in City of Words: American Fiction 1950-1970, Kesey dissolves chronological time "so that past and future events swim into each other . . ." In the first chapter of the novel, Kesey himself gives the reader advice about his treatment of time. He cautions, "Truth doesn't run on time like a commuter train, though time may run on truth.

And the Scenes Gone By and The Scenes to Come flow blending together in the sea-green deep while Now spreads in circles on the surface. So don't sweat it." Later in the novel he further clarifies his technique by observing, "Time overlaps itself." Often the author will intersperse the narration of an event in the present with the relating of a closely associated event from the past. For example, he interrupts the exposition of Hank's rescue of Lee from teen-aged bullies on Halloween of 1961 to record a Halloween from Lee's childhood when Hank rescued him from a pit. Such a method of presentation in which everything seems to happen at once demands multiple readings of the novel for the reader to comprehend fully the temporal sequence. In addition to mixing the past and present, Kesey also uses a spatial simultaneity, a cinematic technique in which he reveals what various characters in different locations were doing at the same moment.

The most experimental technique of the novel is Kesey's use of multiple points of view. The eleven unnumbered chapters begin with the author's or, in some cases, the persona's direct addresses to the reader, which are indented and italicized. Some are de scriptive; some anecdotal; some philosophical. Most of the narrative is conveyed in the third person omniscient point of view, but there are frequent first person passages. To complicate matters further, the novel uses a variety of first person narrators. However, the two most important are Hank and Lee Stamper. Like Faulkner, Kesey often employs stream of consciousness.

He also uses the epistolary method as Lee writes letters about Oregon to Peters, his former roommate in the East.

Sometimes a Great Notion is filled with motifs — in fact, many of the same ones Kesey used in One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest. Descriptions of hands and animal imagery enhance the characterizations. Like McMurphy, Hank has scarred hands and is associated with the lone goose and the dog. Lee, on the other hand, has soft hands and is linked to the crafty fox and the treacherous werewolf. Another similarity to One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest is the influence of folk tales and pop culture. Like Murphy, Hank is related to the cowboy and Captain Marvel; whereas Lee is like Billy Batson, hoping to evoke the magic of the word "Shazam." Biblical allusions are not used as extensively in Sometimesa Great Notion as in the earlier novel, but there are several, including the

parallels between Joby and Job and between Lee and the prodigal son. Kesey again uses the motif of suicides; however, this time he shifts from Crucifixion and castration images to those of drowning.

Also reflecting the despair of the characters are images of imprisonment, most notably the bird cages belonging to Myra and Viv. The essential stylistic difference between the two novels is that Sometimes a Great Notion contains more literary allusions. This is primarily because Lee, as a former English graduate student, enjoys displaying his intellect by referring to the Bible, mythology, and Shakespeare.

Themes

Themes

Like One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest (1962), Sometimes a Great Notion examines the individual's battle against repressive forces. The plot centers on the Stamper family's attempts to fulfill a logging contract made with Wakonda Pacific. Led by Hank Stamper, who was raised according to his father's motto "NEVER GIVE AN INCH," the Oregon family resists the pressures put upon them by the striking logging union.

Because they subscribe to the code of rugged individualism, they bravely face ostracism by the townspeople, illegal scare tactics, including arson, planned by the local union leader Floyd Evenwrite, and the coldly intellectual manipulations of Jonathan Draeger, a union negotiator from California. Echoing One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest, Sometimes a Great Notion reflects Kesey's advocacy of freedom over control by a collectivist system.

Another repressive force in Kesey's novel is nature. The western Oregon coast with its wild forests, its torrential rains, and its raging rivers tests the human spirit. There man is placed in an adversarial relationship with nature, which Kesey emphasizes in his descriptions of the Wakonda Auga River, eroding its banks, each day threatening to destroy the Stamper house. Nowhere does the river's strength seem more horrifying than in Joe Ben's slow death by drowning. Yet Kesey asserts that one must confront nature's challenges, as the Stamper brothers do at the end of the novel when they tackle the herculean task of getting the log booms down the river.

The most dangerous force in Sometimes a Great Notion is the human psyche. As indicated by the novel's epigraph from the song "Good Night, Irene," which includes the lines "Sometimes I get a great notion/To jump into the river . . . an' drown," some people cannot endure the pain and loneliness of life. A number of characters in the novel either attempt or contemplate suicide, including Myra Stamper, Lee Stamper, and Williard Eggleston. Kesey shows great sensitivity to festering psychic wounds — from Henry Stamper's indignance at his father's deserting the family and returning to Kansas, to Myra Stamper's depression at being entrapped in a loveless marriage with an aged husband, to Indian Jenny's hatred of Henry because he would not marry her. The most significant of the psychologically disturbed characters, however, is Lee Stamper, whose oedipal resentment of Hank almost destroys his capacity to love.

In Sometimes a Great Notion, Kesey presents three solutions for alleviating human suffering — the same solutions, in fact, that he presented in his earlier novel. One is discovering one's selfidentity rather than being defined by appearance or role. This theme is seen most dramatically in Viv's realization that both Stamper brothers have used her as a pawn and she must now be herself, not what others want her to be.

The second is giving and receiving brotherhood, that is, learning to forgive and to express love. To develop that theme Kesey depicts the literal brotherhood of Hank and Lee, ultimately showing the spiritual growth in both characters as they teach each other about their strengths and weaknesses. The third solution is affirming life, no matter how difficult that may be. As Kesey writes in his preliminary notes for Sometimes a Great Notion, "You have to fight for life and freedom and individuality and then fight to keep it."

Truth / Interpretation

This core theme is defined by both the novel's substance and its style, in what the characters recall and/or say about their actions in both the past and the present and in the WAY they express themselves. The same events are recalled from the differing perspectives of the characters who participated in those events, with these differences being further emphasized by differences in narrative tense (first person past/third person past/first person present, etc). The most vivid example of this can be found in Hank's and Lee's dispute over the record collection (Chapter 5, Part 2). Both what they recall and the way they recall it, in terms of the language they each use and the narrative tense in which they speak, clearly and powerfully evoke the sense that they each have their own experience and interpretation of what happened and that each is A truth, but not THE truth. What actually happened is left to the reader to define. As perspectives constantly shift and realign and alter, readers are forced into an interpretation of events and situations that may or in fact may not be that of the characters. Readers are therefore in the same situation as the characters, experiencing new truths as they emerge and interpreting them based on their own context. This is true not only of individual incidents, but also of the novel as a whole. On the one hand this creates a certain sense of fragmentation and confusion about the experience, but on the other hand there is also a kaleidoscopic sense of ever-shifting emotional color and shape. The reader is never looking at events the same way twice, and herein is a considerable difference with the characters - in several cases, events are looked at the same way for YEARS. A key example of this include the way Lee recalled the relationship between Hank and his mother, which for his entire adult life colored his feelings about his family.

Fathers and Sons

The motif or pattern of relationships between fathers and sons recurs several times throughout the novel. The most obvious of these is the relationship between Henry and his two very different sons, Hank and Lee. The lives and minds of both sons are dominated by their father's influence, but in very different ways - while both men almost revere their father, Lee's attitude is darkened and twisted by resentment and anger, while Hank's is almost purely respectful, albeit cut with flashes of irreverent humor. Also, by the end of the novel both men, albeit for different reasons, have become determined to do exactly what their father did and continue to operate as independently as they can for as long as they can. Their attitudes are both the spiritual legacy of Henry's highly developed sense of individualism. A similar relationship exists between Floyd Evenwrite

and his father, in that Floyd's life is also dominated by the legacy of his father's attitudes. Both men are anti-Stamper, but more importantly obsessively pro-union. A third near-obsessive father-son relationship exists between Willard Eggleston and the unnamed son he fathered outside of his marriage. Like Henry Stamper, Willard is prepared to do whatever it takes to ensure his son's survival and prosperity. On the other hand, in the same way as the relatively carefree Joe-Ben Stamper is a contrast in characterization with the more careworn Hank and Lee, he is also a contrast in his relationship with his father. Both men were victims of their physical attractiveness, but where Joe-Ben's father became a victim to it (being constantly pursued by women and unable to resist them), Joe-Ben transcended his father's genetic legacy when he became physically scarred, became unattractive to most women (except his wife), and was able to be productive in the way his father was not. In short, the difference between this father/son relationship and the others is this - Joe-Ben was able to move beyond his father's influence and create his own life. Hank, Lee, and Floyd Evenwrite are not. How Willard Eggleston's son reacts to his father's efforts is a circumstance that exists outside the world of the novel.

The American Dream

As with many American novels, the so-called "American Dream" is an ambivalent but haunting and pervasive presence. In theory, it's built upon the foundations written into the United States Constitution, that all "men" are created equal, and that each has the right to "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness." Many novels, this one included, explore how the idealistic American culture, and equally idealistic individuals living and working within that culture, have become corrupted by what might be called the dark side of that dream - unthreatened life, unregulated liberty, and the unrestricted pursuit of any / every kind of happiness imaginable. Often in such novels, this "dark side" is further defined as the pursuit of financial success and personal power, both of which come at the expense of others. The Stampers embody this "dark side," as their determination to freely pursue their life, liberty and happiness on their own terms gets them into extreme conflict with others who are trying to do exactly the same thing. Their philosophy essentially boils down to not only "Never Give an Inch," the motto hanging on a wall in their home. It also boils down to "No Rules but My Own," another aspect of the "dark side" of the American Dream. The important point to note here is that the novel is notably ambivalent in its attitude towards the Stampers. Yes, it portrays them as perhaps excessively ambitious, self-centered, self-fulfilling, and determined. It does NOT say that living according to this perspective is a bad thing. It's possible, in fact, to see that it is in fact saying the opposite. Lee, the character from the beginning who has been portrayed as the intellectual, reasonable, more open minded member of the family, and presumably less obsessed with money and power than his brother Hank, ends up fighting alongside him, making their own defiant declaration of independence. Does this make Lee, Hank and the other Stampers admirable characters? Perhaps the person to ask would be Viv, who by the end of the novel is making a determined effort to leave it all behind, not only because she has been personally beaten down by the Stampers, but because she can't stand the way they seem determined to beat down everyone around them.

Style

Point of View

This novel's exploration and/or utilization of various points of view is easily its most notable and narratively engaging characteristic, more so than its characters, story or themes. The constantly shifting and re-aligning of various tenses, between first and third person and between past and present tense (not to mention the generally more omniscient, objective perspective of each chapter's prologue) functions on several levels. The first is to stylistically reinforce the previously discussed central thematic point relating to the relationship between truth and interpretation, as the shifting perspectives create the clear sense that there is in fact NO truth, only individual perspective. The second level of function of this stylistic choice functions on a more pragmatic level, simply to draw the reader in. S/he is constantly placed in the position of reading carefully, of having to constantly be aware of which perspective is being explored at which point in the narrative and above all what that perspective means. It's simply very good and very evocative storytelling. On a third level, it might be useful to compare the narrative style of this novel to other, perhaps more traditional, single point-of-view novels. Such writings tend to be realistic in the sense that they are told from a single person's perspective - after all, an individual can only truly experience life from his own, individually lived perspective. Nonetheless, such novels are by necessity a limited view of "reality." The narrative style in *Sometimes a Great Notion*, on the other hand, is perhaps less realistic but is, in a broader sense, more "real," since the tapestry of reality is woven of a multiplicity of perspectives and attitudes and actions. In other words, the narrative style of this novel comes close to portraying at least a portion of the tapestry, as opposed to simply defining one of its experiential threads.

Setting

The novel is set on the north west coast of the United States - as the novel itself indicates, as far west as those of a pioneering spirit can go. There is a real sense of frontier here in this setting. Both the town and the Stamper home have a real feeling of being near the wilderness, an emotional and environmental wilderness - on the edge of emotional and geo-environmental civilization. The people in this area, Stampers and townspeople alike, are engaged in a struggle to control, or at least shape, that wilderness, bend it to their will and make it work for them, or at least with them, as opposed to against them. This is an aspect of the previously discussed thematic presence of the "American Dream" - in the minds and experiences of many, the pioneers embodied the American Dream as they moved west, taking incredible chances as they pursued life, freedom, and happiness in ways that the safer, perhaps more frightened did back east in established, safe, already controlled cities. Environments and settings like this were, to coin a phrase, "made" for people like the Stampers - aggressive, determined, free-wheeling, willing to work hard. They were also made to knock them down every once in a while, as evidenced by the setting-specific dangers

provided by the rain, the river, and wrongly falling trees like the ones that injure Henry and kill Joe-Ben. In other words, the setting for this novel is an essential narrative and thematic component to the story, in that it both supports and challenges its characters, defining their particular, unique story in a way that, had it been set in New York or London or Bangkok, wouldn't have happened.

Language and Meaning

Aside from the way its verbs define the various perspectives and points of view contained in the novel (see "Style, Point of View"), language is effectively used to define and illuminate the characters' states of being. This is true of some characters more than others, and is particularly true of Hank and Lee. Language relating to Hank, both in his first person narration and in third person narration describing him, tends to be less intellectual, more emotional and visceral. Lee's language, on the other hand, carries with it much more intellectual weight, and is full of allusions to other writings. It's clear that Lee, as a character, has read more and thought more than just about everyone with the possible exception of Draeger. One particularly noteworthy aspect of Lee's language is the way he repeatedly refers to works by Shakespeare, and particularly the play *Macbeth*. This is important because *Macbeth* is about a highly respected, relatively noble man whose spirit becomes corrupted. This is what happens to Lee - he starts out determined to rise above the corruptive, corrosive influence of his family and his own desire for revenge, but ends up as dark-spirited in his own way as Macbeth is. The parallel goes even further - while Macbeth kills and is himself killed, Lee attempts to "kill" the relationship between Viv and Hank, and has his resistance to not being drawn into the Stamper family "killed" by his determination to not let his brother get the better of him. Both he and Hank, in fact, are corrupted in the same way as Macbeth is by the slogan "Never Give an Inch." Hank's corruption begins in childhood while Lee's begins as an adult, but it's important to note they end in exactly the same place - determined never to give an inch to the other. In this sense they are like Macbeth, who despite his growing, doom-filled awareness that he has corrupted and destroyed himself, is compelled to persist on his destructive path. Hank and Lee both are themselves compelled to persist on their paths, with the result that they, like Macbeth, experience irrevocable and life altering transformations.

Structure

As previously discussed in relation to Chapter 11, the most important structural element of this novel is the way it ends with its beginning - the arrival of Draeger, the altercation at the Stamper home, and Draeger's encounter with Viv in the Snag. There is a sense of endless cycle in this structure, that the confrontations narrated between the beginning and the end are going to continue. This sense born out by the fact that one of the novel's final images is of Lee and Hank sailing down the river with a raft of logs, presumably starting off on the next leg of their journey of rivalry. Structure in this situation echoes and reinforces story, as the novel has itself been about the cyclical repetition and perpetuation of rivalries. Aside from that key point, the other significant

point about this structure is that in essence, the "present" serves as bookends for the "past," with memories and recollections within that "past" taking the experience of both the characters and the reader even further into the history that has made the "present" what it is. It's what might be described as an iceberg kind of structure. In the same way that an iceberg only shows a small percentage of itself above the surface of the water, leaving vast portions of what's underneath the surface unrevealed, the present of *Sometimes a Great Notion* is only a small portion of the entire experience of the novel and its characters. In other words, the "present" is the surface ... the past is what makes the present what it is. To continue the metaphor, the main body of the novel is like the main body of the iceberg, the main difference being that UNLIKE the iceberg, the novel makes this main body visible. Meanwhile, the prologues at the beginning of each chapter serve as a generally metaphoric introduction to what that "main body" is thematically and emotionally about. They are essentially guideposts along the narrative's journey, symbolically indicating not only where the reader is going, but how s/he is going to get there.

Quotes

"... a while to learn about the river and to realize that [settlers] must plan their home sites with an acknowledged zone of respect for its steady appetite, surrender a hundred or so yards to its hungry future." Chapter 1, p. 4.

"*Proven!* that the fool Man will ... relinquish his *firmest stand* for Love ... Love ... Draeger believed - actually does conquer all; Love - or the Fear of Not Having It, or the Worry about Not Having Enough of It, or the Terror of Losing It ... to Draeger this knowledge was a weapon ..." Chapter 1, p. 10.

"[Draeger] had been collecting such aphorisms for years now, and dreamed of some day compiling them into a book of essays. But even if the dream failed to come off, the little phrases came in quite handy in his work, little notes taken daily in the lesson of life. Should a test ever present itself, he would be ready ..." Chapter 2, p. 56.

"'You, and in fact quite a lot of your generation ...[are unable to] 'go mad' in the classical sense ... you are too hip to yourself on a psychological level. You are all too intimate with too many of the symptoms of insanity to be caught completely off your guard. Another thing: all of you have a talent for releasing frustration through clever fantasy ... you may be neurotic as hell for the rest of your life ... but the best I can offer is plain old schizophrenia with delusional tendencies." Dr. Maynard to Leland, Chapter 2, p. 72.

"...it took nothing more than my kid brother coming to spend a month with us to show me that there are *other* ways of winning - like winning by giving in, by being soft, by not gritting your goddamn teeth and getting your best hold ... by being weak, by losing, by doing your worst instead of your best. And learning that come near to doing me in." Hank, Chapter 3, p. 111.

"Hank was walking barefoot up the dock ... Lee marveled at the scamper of small muscles across the narrow white back ... did it take that much muscle just to walk, or was Hank showing off his manly development? Every movement constituted open aggression against the very air through which Hank passed ... Lee decided ... he doesn't just walk; he consumes distance step by carnivorous step." Chapter 3, p. 121.

"[Viv] ... let her eyes roam over ... all the childhood adornments that she knew she must leave as sure as the walls themselves ... made a silent excited vow of allegiance to all the holy old dreams and hopes and ideals that these walls had held, then, chiding herself for being such a silly, kissed the face in the glass good-by." Chapter 4, p.160.

"I needed the catharsis of being part of his overthrow. I needed to wield the torch, hold the knife. I needed the stain of his actual blood on my conscience as a poultice to draw out the pus of long cowardice. I needed the nourishment of victory to give me the strength I had been cheated of by years of starvation. I needed to fell the tree that had been hogging my sunshine before I even germinated." Lee, Chapter 4, p. 198.

"We almost made it that time. A little courage on someone's part and we might have made it. We were swollen and ripe for an instant together, ready for picking, offering our store to each other's hesitant fingers ... a little tender courage at that rare right instant, and things might well have turned out differently ..." Lee, Chapter 5, Part 1, p. 214.

"...you cannot help feeling, for a long time after, that any jig you whistle, hymn you hum, or song you sing is somehow immutably tuned to an echo yet unheard, or relentlessly echoing a tune long forgotten." Chapter 6, Prologue, p. 286.

"...Hank dreams that he is at the top of his class and nobody is trying to pull him down, nobody is trying to push him off, nobody but himself even knows that he is up there." Chapter 6, Part 2, p. 345.

"'If we was to get into it with Russia I'd fight for us right down to the wire. And if Oregon was to get into it with California I'd fight for Oregon. But if somebody ... gets into it with *me*, then I'm for *me*! When the chips are down, I'm my own patriot. I don't give a goddam the other guy is my own *brother* wavin' the American flag and singing the friggin' Star Spangled Banner!" Hank to Draeger, Chapter 7, p. 363.

"[Willard] listening to the solitary peck of water dripping from his coat onto the linoleum, began to weep. In complete silence. His little chin fluttered and his shoulders jerked with the violence of his sobbing, but he made not the slightest sound., This silence made him weep harder than ever - it seemed he'd been crying in secret for years - but he knew he wouldn't let himself be heard. Especially now, no matter how it hurt to keep still. He was too practiced at keeping hidden within the black India-ink outline of his looks to ever destroy the effect of letting anyone know he could cry." Chapter 8 p. 426-7.

"'What I'd call a man with a spine is a man able to pay for his kid by *living* for him, no matter how hard it comes ...'" Hank to Willard, Chapter 8, p. 465.

Adaptations

In 1971 a two-hour film version of Sometimes a Great Notion was released.

Directed by Paul Newman, the movie had a talented cast, including Newman as Hank Stamper, Michael Sarrazin as Lee, Henry Fonda as Henry Stamper, and Lee Remick as Viv. Newman made no attempt to transfer the complex techniques of the novel to the film medium; thus the movie merely presents the plot of Kesey's book. A badly edited version of the film, retitled Never Give A Inch, was later shown on network television.

Key Questions

With its epic sweep and radical experimentation with narrative techniques, Sometimes a Great Notion is not a novel easily grasped in a casual reading. Indeed, it almost demands a second or even a third perusal. Discussion of this book will likely center on individuals' responses to the intellectual demands Kesey places upon them.

Literarily sophisticated readers will probably react most favorably to Kesey's Faulknerian treatment of multiple points of view and Lee's allusions, reflecting his Yale education. Serious students of film will probably appreciate Kesey's adaptation of cinematic devices that relate this novel to a screenplay.

1. Do you find Kesey's combination of the vernacular and intellectual idioms an artistic achievement or an awkward yoking of two disparate traditions?

2. Are Kesey's experiments with rendering time, his multiple points of view, and his use of cinematic techniques effective for rendering full reality or too ambitious and innovative for most readers to appreciate?

3. What do you think is Kesey's attitude to the great notion "to jump into the river an' drown"? Why do some of the characters contemplate or commit suicide?

4. How does Kesey characterize the Wakonda Auga River? How does that characterization differ from Twain's portrayal of the Mississippi River in The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn?

5. Do you find the rivalry that Lee Stamper feels for his brother Hank psychologically plausible? Do you believe the parallelism of Lee's seeing through a hole in the wall Hank and Lee's mother Myra making love and, years later, Hank's witnessing through the same hole the lovemaking of Lee and Hank's wife Viv, who looks like Myra, too contrived?

6. What is the function of Joe Ben in the novel? Indian Jenny? Jonathan Draeger?

7. Do you find the device of Henry Stamper's severed arm shockingly grotesque and distasteful or a meaningful symbol of individualistic defiance?

8. Do you think the major females in this novel are well-developed characters or serve merely as sexual objects?

How do you respond to Kesey's statement made in an interview with Paul Krassner: "Women's Lib was the real issue in Notion. I didn't know this when I wrote it, but think about it: It's about men matching egos and wills on the battleground of Vivian's unconsulted hide. When she leaves at the end of the book, she chooses to leave the only people she loves for a bleak and uncertain but at least equal future"?

9. In a letter to Ken Babbs, Kesey said of Sometimes a Great Notion, "It's a big book. . . . Certainly a remarkable book. Perhaps even a great book."

Would you label Kesey's second published novel "a great book"?

Topics for Discussion

Discuss the idea of the so-called "American Dream" within the context of the actions of the various characters. How do the actions/reactions of, in particular, Hank, Lee, Henry, Evenwrite, Willard, and even Simone embody that dream. Consider both the dream's positive aspects (freedom, prosperity, joy) and its negative ones (overwhelming ambition, ruthlessness for success, money and/or power as the source of that joy).

Discuss the thematic and/or dramatic implications and/or relevance of the name "Stamper."

Discuss the similarities and differences in the characters of Lee and Hank Stamper. Consider their level and means of education, and their various attitudes - towards their family, towards work, and towards those who stand in their way, those who have hurt them, and those who have the potential to help them.

Discuss how Viv's one night of lovemaking with Lee transforms her, and leads her to make the final decision to leave Hank and the rest of the Stampers for good. Include consideration of the novel's extended and varied water imagery - in particular, the fact that rain continues to fall as they consummate their feelings for each other, and also the novel's final images of Hank and Lee being carried down the river.

Discuss the thematic and/or dramatic implications and/or relevance of the novel's concluding with a reference to Indian Jenny discovering the identity of a new lover in her mystic fortune telling.

Consider the novel's key theme relating to the relationship between truth and interpretation. Because an incident has been interpreted the same way for years (i.e. Lee's recollections of Hank's relationship with his mother), does that make that interpretation more of a truth? In what other ways does interpretation shape truth, in the mind of the person DOING the interpreting, and also the mind of the person HEARING the interpretation?

Consider the second of the "Quotes" from this novel (Chapter 1, p. 10). Discuss the role of love and its various natures in the novel.

Discuss the nature of the relationship between past and present in the lives of the characters. How does the past affect the present? How does the present affect interpretation of the past? Which of the characters is willing to let go of the past in order to more effectively live in the present, and which lets the past dominate and define the present?

Literary Precedents

Kesey's notes to Sometimes a Great Notion illuminate his literary precedents. In them he confesses that he wanted his second published novel to be "a cross between Faulkner and Burroughs and also me," and he reminds himself to study the panoramic effects in John Steinbeck's novel, The Grapes of Wrath (1939), Stephen Vincent Benet's poem, John Brown's Body (1928) and Dylan Thomas's play, Under Milk Wood (1953). Technically, particularly in terms of time scheme and point of view, the writer to whom he seems most indebted is William Faulkner.

Kesey's beginning the novel with the last events of his plot and then going back in time to develop his characters and explain how those events happened recalls Faulkner's Light in August (1932). His use of multiple points of view was probably influenced by The Sound and the Fury (1929), Absalom, Absalom! (1936), and As I Lay Dying (1930), and Lee Stamper's characterization seems modeled upon Quentin Compson.

In an interview with Robert Faggen (Paris Review 36, no. 130 [Spring 1994]: 58-94), Kesey credited Orson Welles's film The Magnificent Ambersons with providing the major inspiration for his narrative experimentation. Kesey observes that the film taught him to move along narrative by going from one situation to another with just a few lines of a character's dialogue as a bridge. Kesey explains, "The first part of The Magnificent Ambersons covers a long period in a very short time, and you get to see the characters in a structured, stylized way — they step out on stage and deliver lines that help with the exposition. That influenced me in terms of structure."

Related Titles

Thematically, Sometimes a Great Notion bears a close resemblance to One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest in presenting the battle between the individual and a repressive system. It also reflects Kesey's ongoing interest in the frontier hero, an interest seen also in One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest, Sailor Song (1992), and Last Go Round (1994).

Copyright Information

Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults

Editor - Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Library of Congress
Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults
Includes bibliographical references.
Summary: A multi-volume compilation of analytical essays on and study activities for fiction, nonfiction, and biographies written for young adults.
Includes a short biography for the author of each analyzed work.
1. Young adults□Books and reading. 2.Young adult literature□History and criticism. 3. Young adult literature□Bio-bibliography. 4. Biography□Bio-bibliography.
[1. Literature□History and criticism. 2. Literature□Bio-bibliography]
I. Beetz, Kirk H., 1952
Z1037.A1G85 1994 028.1'62 94-18048ISBN 0-933833-32-6

Printed in the United States of America First Printing, November 1994