Stop-time Study Guide

Stop-time by Frank Conroy

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Plot Summary

This autobiographical memoir recounts important incidents and circumstances in the author's life from the ages of nine through eighteen. It is, essentially, what is generally known as a "coming of age" story, a narrative in which a young person discovers important, necessary truths about the nature of being an adult - indeed, of simply being a human being. This is the narrative's primary theme, with secondary themes exploring the attraction and responsibilities of individual independence and the metaphorical nature of travel.

The memoir begins with a prologue set in the author's adulthood during his time in England. He describes his routine of sometimes interrupting his calm, ordered, productive, writerly life with drunken, almost dangerous road trips into London.

After the description of one such road trip, the author turns the face of his recollections towards his past - specifically, his childhood as the son of a man who spent much of his adult life in mental hospitals and the stepson of his mother's unfocused, undisciplined, and opportunistic boyfriend. The action shifts back and forth between the family's New York City apartment and the Florida wilderness where they construct a home. While in Florida, the author befriends another boy, Tobey, who for a while is his best friend but who, as narration later recounts, becomes essentially a stranger. The discovery of how people and once-close friendships change is, the narrative seems to suggest, an inescapable part of the "coming of age" process.

Important experiences in Florida include the author's youthful preoccupation or perhaps even obsession with becoming an expert manipulator of the yo-yo, and his burgeoning, almost simultaneous preoccupation with girls and sex. The relationship between the two, the childish game and the more adult interest in, among other sexual things, female anatomy is, in the book's apparent thematic perspective, another manifestation of the process of "coming of age".

Eventually, the author and his family settle in New York City, where the author coasts through school, where his step-father Jean engages in one get-rich-quick scheme after another, where his mother Dagmar becomes increasingly disillusioned with Jean, and where the author's adored baby sister Jessica is born. Also in New York, the author encounters a succession of colorful personalities, two of whom are tenants in the family's spare room - the nasty, manipulative Donald and the self-indulgent, neurotic Nell. Narration describes how Jean, who may or may not have had an actual affair with Nell, turns to Dagmar for help in getting her out of the house, help which Dagmar, who sees Nell as Jean's problem and responsibility, at first refuses to provide but then supplies ... at the cost of ongoing happiness with Jean.

Important experiences in New York, as the author continues to mature, include his growing disrespect for school and his discovery, at his first real job, that good humor, good relationships with fellow employees, and occasional bursts of work ethic are not enough to keep a job ... yet another step in the "coming of age" process.

After graduating high school, the author travels to Europe to continue his education. There he develops an intensely emotional relationship with the Swedish Christina, writes entrance exams for American universities, and loses the last of his illusions about his shallow, flighty, manipulative mother. Upon his return to America, he moves out of the family home in New York and away to a welcoming new life in university.

The book concludes with an epilogue in which the author describes the irony of a question posed by a bystander after a car accident from which the author walks away. That question is "What's all this?", a question which, in the context of the book in particular and of the genre of autobiography in general, can be seen as both probing and ironic.

Prologue, Chapter 1

Prologue, Chapter 1 Summary and Analysis

In the prologue, the author describes his generally peaceful and productive country life in England, a life occasionally interrupted by usually drunken visits into London and racing returns home in the middle of the night.

The first part of the first chapter is taken up with the author's recollections of his father, whom the author recalls as being in and out of mental hospitals the whole while he was growing up, and briefly describes his father's death from cancer when he was eleven.

The bulk of the chapter is taken up with the author's recollections and descriptions of his life at "an experimental boarding school in Pennsylvania called Freemont", where the overall atmosphere was one of both academic and personal freedom. He narrates at length the "trial" of one of the boys, Ligget, on charges that he was a racist. Boys are appointed as prosecutor and defendant, witnesses are called, and Ligget, who is unable to speak in his own defense, is eventually found guilty. His punishment: each of the forty other boys is allowed to take one free punch at him. The author describes how Ligget ended up in the hospital with a broken jaw, how Ligget never came back to the school, and how none of the other boys was ever punished.

The final, brief section of the chapter is written in first person present tense—the other sections were written in first person, past tense. The author describes a sleepless night, his wakefulness triggering a blurring between memory and present existence, and how his reflections led him to recall "the exact, spatial center of [his] life, the one still point", a "waking in a white room filled with sunshine ... the white walls, the sunlight, the voices all exist in absolute purity."

The collection of memories, and contemplations of those memories, that makes up the main body of Stop-Time is bookended by the prologue and epilogue, both of which define the personal and narrative context for the narratives sandwiched between them. In terms of the former, the reader is given a sense of who the author is as a human being—someone for whom it is necessary to interrupt the order of life with a choosing of temporary anarchy. Note the potential paradox in the idea that anarchy, which is by definition random and free and impulsive, can be a deliberate choice.

Meanwhile, there is the book's narrative context to consider which, also by definition, is somewhat broader in scope than its personal context, given that even a first person autobiography, such as this is, takes a more objective, structured, considered perspective on character and event than that of an individual living in the moment. In other words, there is the sense that as he writes about his life, the author is thematically suggesting that his experience is perhaps what eventually every life turns out to be: a series of anarchic embedded in what we believe to be order. These events, the reader

comes to understand, are all either connected to what the author calls "the one still point" in each individual life or undertaken with the desire to make that connection.

Finally, the technique of slipping out of past tense narration into present tense is repeated several times throughout the narrative.

Chapters 2 and 3

Chapters 2 and 3 Summary and Analysis

Chapter two begins with the author's vivid recollections of waiting to be picked up and driven away from his last day at Freemont School. He describes how he, his sister Alison, his mother, and his mother's boyfriend/husband Jean drive to Florida to make a new life, and offers a glimpse into the history of Jean's family that made him so independent. He also narrates in first person present tense a frightening encounter with Jean's alcoholic brother Victor that, the author asserts, changed his view of the world.

The author also narrates his summer-long friendship with Tobey, a boy from the neighborhood with whom he explores the wilderness, describing the sense of both silent solitude and joy at the core of their experiences. He focuses particularly on their discovery of the carcass of a dead mule, and the simultaneously growing sense of feeling like a misfit in a world of nature.

In chapter three, the author describes Jean's plans to earn income by building a second Florida home and renting it out, commenting on Jean's realization that to do that, he needed to earn some seed money, and then on his plan to travel north to do just that. The author describes his parting from Tobey and a perplexing visit en route to his slightly unhinged paternal grandmother in Jacksonville. He then recounts the conversations he has with Jean on the long drive, commenting on Jean's intellectually manipulative style of "debate". The chapter concludes with a sleepy comment from Alison that she feels like she's been on this trip all her life.

Noteworthy elements in this section include the introduction of several important people in the author's young life, the most important being Jean, his mother and Tobey. There is the sense, in the portrayals of these characters, that they are all more clearly understood by the author as he writes about them than they were when he actually experienced being with them. Here is an example of the broader narrative perspective employed in autobiography discussed earlier—the author writes with insight he has gained in the years since he actually lived the moments he describes. It's important to note, meanwhile, that all three of these main supporting characters take on additional dimension and more realistic and more multi-faceted, or, in other words, more human, as the author's story unfolds.

Chapters 4 and 5

Chapters 4 and 5 Summary and Analysis

In chapter four, the author describes his experiences accompanying Jean and his mother to the remote, barely habitable cabin where they live during their winter-long weekend employment at the Southbury Training School, "a Connecticut state institution for the feeble minded". He describes dreading their arrival at the cabin, the loneliness of the routine there, and his constant terror of being left alone at night while the grownups were at the school working as night attendants. At one point, he writes, his fear drives him to insist upon staying with Jean and his mother at the school. He describes the sounds, smells and atmosphere of the place, his terror of both the people living there and the other attendants, and his eventual decision to sleep in the car rather than in the office, where there was no door. He also describes his encounter with one of the teachers at the school. During a visit to the library, he writes, he was confronted by a teacher who thought he was one of the residents and treated him with hostility and disrespect.

In chapter five, the author describes how a string of temporary boarders moved in and out of his mother's apartment in New York until bitter pianist Donald moved in and stayed for ten years or so. Donald, he writes, was asexual, nasty, vindictive, superficially witty, devoted to Dagmar, and therefore jealous of anyone, including both the author and Jean, who took her attention. The author describes how a growing enmity between Jean and Donald peaked one Christmas with Donald's humiliation of Jean with a series of joke items purchased from a "novelty" store. The chapter concludes with the author's examination of how the relationship between Donald and his mother ended, and a present-tense description of how Donald accompanied the gowned and sequined Dagmar at a recital at the author's school. "I am not sad," the author writes, "not happy, not anything. My eyes fill with irrelevant tears."

In these two chapters, the reader can see the real beginnings of what in a work of fiction might be called "story" and "plot". In terms of the former, this section marks the beginning of an archetypal "coming of age" story, an often-utilized and often-referred to sub-genre of writing in which the central character, through various experiences, moves out of childhood and begins to become an adult. There is the sense, in fact, that a specific dividing line between the two experiences manifests in this section, between the childish terrors of chapter four and the encounters with prejudice, hate and ambivalence that, it seems, send the author spinning into adulthood. These incidents, in the context of a work of fiction, would be defined as incidents of the plot, events that make up and define the story.

Chapters 6, 7 and 8

Chapters 6, 7 and 8 Summary and Analysis

At the beginning of chapter six, the author describes the family's return to Florida, leaving the responsible and organized sixteen-year-old Alison in New York. The author then narrates his experiences under the hot, white, shapeless sun as he, Jean, the two-months pregnant Dagmar, and Tobey salvage still-usable wood from an abandoned army base. In first person present tense, he describes how, on a lunch break, he and Tobey adventure through the rest of the base, their dialogue for the first time including crudities like "shit" and "fuck".

The main part of the chapter is taken up with the author's description of a trip to a county fair with Tobey's family, a trip that begins with the author, as he describes it, leaving a quarreling Dagmar and Jean. At the fair, the author and Tobey have a great time on the bumper cars and compete at a ring toss to win a holstered silver pistol. The author describes how he wins, how the man running the game tossed his rings aside and told him he lost, and then manipulated him into feeling his testicles. The author then describes how he rejoined the family, pretending to sleep on the drive home, and closes the chapter with a narration of how, when he got home, his mother and Jean were still arguing.

The author begins chapter seven with a description of how after the fair he and Tobey no longer spent time together because Tobey had to accompany his drunken father to work and keep him sober. He also describes how his reactions to the woods changed without Tobey with him, and how he began to take refuge in the complicated pen Jean had constructed for the family's three dogs. He then describes the carefully thought out process by which he did the chore of cleaning up the dogs' shit, and recounts, in present tense, the various dreams of freedom and nature's beauty he has while napping in the dogs' pen. He returns to past tense to describe how one night he went out to visit the dogs, watched as one of them tried desperately to escape, how she turned on him when he tried to prevent her, and eventually jumped the fence. He describes how his disappointment in the dogs then echoed his disappointment in people, and concludes the chapter with narration of a bicycle ride he took into the city, his visit to a movie, and his post-movie encounter with Ramos and Ricardo, a pair of yo-yo exhibitionists from California.

In the first part of chapter eight, the author describes his determination to win a special diamond-studded yo-yo in a contest to be judged by Ramos and Ricardo. He writes of the ease and comfort and rightness of his practice regimen, and then narrates the contest and his eventual win in detail. He then describes how, as Ramos and Ricardo leave, he asked them about their most difficult trick, demonstrated by Ramos and which the author finds beautiful. He learns that the trick is called "The Universe", because the yo-yo "goes around and around ... like the planets."

The author then narrates his poolside conversation with his cousin Lucky, the son of alcoholic Uncle Victor, and two beautiful girls, one of which is a redhead. The squirrel of the chapter's title turns out to be Lucky's pet squirrel Sneezy, who accompanies the author and Lucky on a secret visit to where the beautiful girls live, a visit that results in the author getting his first glimpses of the female body in a comic escape when Sneezy bites the author's ear. The chapter concludes with the author's description of his eventual success with the Universe trick, but how the yo-yo stopped mattering because, on the night of the competition, which he didn't win, he "watched a naked girl let down her long red hair."

There are several important elements to note in this section. First is the continuation of the "coming of age" process, with events described, like the childlike fun with Tobey, the more adult, sex-related "fun" with Lucky, suggesting that at this stage in his life the author was in transition—part child, part adult. There is the strong sense, however, that by the end of chapter eight, where he indicates that he is more concerned with the naked girl than with his yo-yo, that transition has moved the author irretrievably into adulthood.

The second important element here is a technical one—specifically, the way in which the three chapters are interconnected by narrative, with events and reactions of one leading into events and reactions in the next. In other words, the author is giving order to what, at the time, must have seemed like random experiences—he is either shaping his life into a story or discovering the story that has given his life shape.

A further important element is the subtlety with which the author portrays himself after the incident of the lost gun and of what would today be called the sexual assault of the game operator. In his simple phrasing and word choices, describing himself as pretending to sleep, he creates a powerful, evocative portrait of constrained upset, possibly even trauma. It's interesting, however, to note the vivid contrast with the detailed, comic, almost farcical description of the visit to the girls and the complications triggered by Sneezy the squirrel.

Chapters 9 and 10

Chapters 9 and 10 Summary and Analysis

In the brief chapter nine, the author describes his family's move back to New York, and Jean's latest money-making idea—selling fruit on the street corner. An encounter with a corrupt policeman is a particularly noteworthy event in an otherwise unexciting summer. The fruit stand fails quickly, and the author describes how he then filled his time by first imagining what it would be like to jump off the fire escape and then hanging his head, shoulders and arms over the edge of the roof for hours at a time. This, he writes, gave him a sense of weightlessness and freedom.

Chapter ten narrates a school day in the author's young life—his barely conscious getting out of the house, his noting the signs of ongoing unease between his mother and Jean, his early morning job shelving books at the library, and his apparently habitual late arrival at school. This particular day is first made different by an across-the-shelves encounter with a beautiful young woman at the library, whose sudden breakdown into tears sharply disrupts the surge of sexual energy the author experiences as the result of glimpsing her thigh. Later, the young author is warned that if his pattern of lateness continues, he will be expelled, and is then sent to meet with a nervous young man who seems to be a counselor of some kind and who asks what the author feels are increasingly awkward questions about his home life. After leaving the young man, the author attends French class, taught by the angrily frustrated Miss Tuts, and an unnamed class, taught by the self-absorbed, self-dramatizing Dr. Casey. All these encounters are framed within the structure of a climb from the ground floor to the third floor. The chapter concludes with a narration of how, at the end of the day, the students all rushed back out onto the street and onto the way back home.

In this brief section, the first point to note relates to the author's description of his encounter with the policeman, which gives a clear indication of an essential component of his coming of age story—disillusionment, or the loss of idealization. It's important to note here that many coming of age stories follow the almost archetypal pattern of portraying such disillusionment, but many also take the reverse approach; i.e., portraying how young people with the contextual belief that other people and/or life are not good learning that they, or at least some, are good, or at least can be.

The second noteworthy point is the metaphor inherent in the author's description of the multiple floors in his school. This metaphor suggests that for him, school took him away from life—the higher the class is in the building, the less likely its content is to have anything to do with life; thus, the metaphoric implication that when the children leave school, they rejoin their real world.

Chapters 11, 12

Chapters 11, 12 Summary and Analysis

Chapter eleven begins with a brief description of the birth of the author's half sister Jessica, of his wonder and joy at her presence, and of his mother's transformation from emotional breast-feeder to more practical bottle-feeder. Shortly after Jessica's birth, the author writes, his mother took her to Denmark for an extended visit with her family, leaving the author alone in the apartment with Jean.

Shortly after Dagmar left, the author writes, Jean allowed a thin, nervous young woman to move in on what was understood to be a temporary basis. The woman, Nell Smith, is revealed to be a suicidal, manipulative, lying writer/actress/neurotic, whose relationship with Jean, according to the author, may or may not have been sexual. Even though Jean initially enjoys the chattiness of their relationship, the author writes, eventually Nell's highly-strung, hermit-like self-absorption becomes wearing. When several weeks pass with no sign of Nell leaving, Jean writes a long letter to Dagmar explaining the situation and asking her to come home and force Nell out. Dagmar writes back to tell Jean that he got himself into this situation, he can get himself out.

The author then describes his sudden, impulsive, unprepared decision to run away from home and make his way back down to Florida. The first ride he hitches is with a traveling salesman who tells a story of how he too ran away, from a home with an abusively violent father, and who warns the author of some of the dangers he faces. The next ride is with an overweight trucker, with dreams of being discovered as an opera singer and who buys the author dinner at a truck stop. After being dropped off by the trucker, and as narration shifts into the present tense, the author describes a night-time journey through a roadside town in Delaware and his eventual night of sleep curled up under a pine tree.

Chapter twelve opens with three vignettes of other nights in his life when the author slept away from home. First is a night in Harlem with his family's cleaning lady Madge, in which she keeps him safe from gangs. Second is a night in a treehouse in Florida, during which he stares "at the moon, sick with rage". Third is a drunken night in his car on the way back from London, during which his memories of the night under the tree in Delaware waken him with fear.

Back on his journey to Florida, the author tries to get a day's work at a truckstop, but has no luck. That night, he ends up at another truckstop, looking for a truck with a license plate that looks as though it would go all the way to Florida. He finds one, spends the night inside, and wakes up the following morning having realized that he needs to go home—if he didn't, he writes, he would never see his beloved sister Jessica again.

The author then finds himself in downtown Wilmington in Delaware, and in the company of a Traveler's Aid worker at the train station. He tries to convince her to just give him some money to get home, but she refuses, nevertheless finding him some food. As he eats, the author gives her Jean's contact information, but she is unable to get hold of him and is forced to arrange for the author to spend the night in a home for juvenile criminals. This makes him run away and spend the night in an emptied chemical fertilizer bag at a train station. He returns to Travelers Aid to find the woman has spoken to Jean who has wired money for the author's trip home. "I felt a flash of annoyance," the author comments, because Jean was "too cheap to send the extra couple of dollars for the train, which I would have enjoyed, so I had to take the bus, which I hated." The Travelers Aid woman puts him on the bus and watches him leave.

The first point to note about this section is the title of chapter eleven, "Blindman's Buff", which refers to a game usually played by children in which one player is blindfolded and has to tag all the other players without actually seeing them.

The second noteworthy element here is the references to Jessica, who doesn't play an overly significant role in the narrative but who, nevertheless, is the trigger for what seems to be the author's first experience of selfless love. His other relationships are colored by affection, joy, resentment, tolerance, and other feelings, but only when it comes to Jessica does he feel the complete surrender that is the hallmark of such love. Even though it's glimpsed almost in passing, there is the sense that of all the events of these two chapters, and perhaps even of his transitional life to this point, the emergence of these feelings is one of the most subtly significant.

Finally, chapter twelve contains the first reference to the author's present life in England since the prologue. It is also the last reference until the epilogue. There are two points to note here—how the reference reminds the reader of the context in which the story is being told (i.e., the present day context of the author's life), and of the relationship in the author's life between past and present. This last is particularly noteworthy in that there are very few specific, explicit relationships to this relationship which are, in fact, implied by the very nature of autobiography and/or memoir—that sense of perspective on the past that living in the present provides, simply by being later.

Chapters 13, 14, 15 and 16

Chapters 13, 14, 15 and 16 Summary and Analysis

In the first part of chapter thirteen, the author describes how a friend at school patronizingly told him that the author's father was going to die from cancer. This, the author says, was the first he'd heard about his father's actual illness. He receives reluctant but honest confirmation from his mother, who tells him the truth while using the toilet. He then describes how he and Dagmar both arrived back home in New York, how Dagmar quickly got rid of Nell Smith, how Dagmar and Jean's relationship changed, and how Jean's behavior changed as a result. He writes of how one day, "after a bad morning at school and a long afternoon at work" he avoided going home, having dinner out and going to the movies, being overtaken by a surge of powerful emotion and running "his head into the wall [of the elevator] again and again, stunning [him]self but feeling no pain." When he gets home, his angry/anxious mother asks where he was, and he says he was at a funeral.

In chapter fourteen, the author relates a visit to Florida when he was sixteen, a visit he looked forward to but which, as he describes it, turned out to be disappointing. The bad times include an uncomfortable, short-lived job in a movie theatre, an uneasy visit with the acne-faced, barely articulate, school dropout Tobey, a second short-lived job as a pin boy in a bowling alley, and a sexually unsuccessful front-seat fumble with a hitchhiking local girl. At the end of the summer, the author writes, he sold his guitar and went back to New York.

In chapter fifteen, the author describes his journey to his latest place of work, the Electro Research Company (detouring into a present tense narration of a tension-filled walk past a quarrel between a pair of angry bums). When he arrives at the grubby, messy office, he's given his day's responsibilities by boss Willie, chats with disciplined ex-con Jimmy, and taunts brawny salesman Sid. A few playful but carefully calculated water-fights later, the author is fired. A two-day, concentrated effort at organizing the messy store-room doesn't help—Willie tells him that the next day a potential replacement is to be interviewed. The day of the interview, the author describes how he cons the potential replacement out of actually going up for the interview, and then comments that his tactic worked: by the following Wednesday, he had his job back.

Chapter sixteen consists of a series of vignettes. The first focuses on Alison, with the author describing her independence, her emotional distance from her family which, the author hints, came at considerable emotional cost, and her complex relationship with a boy named Jack, part sexual conquest and part pupil—she mentored him through his difficult classes). The second vignette focuses on the author's relationship with his mother which became more confrontational the older he got and with Jean which, because of Jean's increasing mental withdrawal, became more and more distant. The third focuses on the author's failures in high school and his easy, lazy passing of summer school. The fourth, and longest, vignette focuses on his first sexual experience,

with a girl at the movies. Narration describes how their sexual petting at the movies made them both want intercourse, how they went to a concealed spot in a nearby park to do the deed, how the girl cried out in pain at the initial penetration, how the author felt transformed at his climax, and how, as she walked away, the girl asked his name.

The title of chapter sixteen, "Losing my Cherry", which is slang for losing one's sexual virginity, can be seen as applying to events in the previous three chapters as well where he has several other "first time" circumstances, in which he loses metaphorical virginity. For or the first time the author becomes aware of the true causes of his father's death, and of the casual way in which his mother views both his father and her relationship with him. For the first time, he becomes aware of surging resentment of his mother and of powerful, overwhelming frustrations in general, hence the scene in the elevator. For the first time, he becomes aware through his uncomfortable visit with Tobey that an idealized past doesn't stay preserved in time, but evolves in the same way, and for the same reasons, as life itself. For the first time, he becomes aware of the importance of work and work ethic to keeping a job, and how his propensity for humor can sometimes be self-damaging. Finally, there is his first time sexual experience, the story of which is made unsentimental, poignant, and ultimately very telling by the revelation that learning the name of who she was with was, for the girl, an afterthought. The implication here is that for the author, on some level his own sense of identity was an afterthought—it was more important to him to simply get laid.

Other important elements in this section include the description of Alison's life and relationship with Jack, which foreshadows events in chapter twenty in which she has some kind of breakdown. There are also the strong emotions evoked by the description of the elevator breakdown, in which the language is stark and sharp, and by the author's reaction to the change in Tobey, in which the language is subtle but undeniably melancholy, almost grief-stricken. Finally, there is the section describing the author's job at the Electro Research Company, populated with vividly sketched characters, comic situations, and ambiguous morality.

Chapters 17, 18 and 19

Chapters 17, 18 and 19 Summary and Analysis

In chapter seventeen, the author describes the beginning of his ocean voyage to Europe, with his mother and Jessica waving to him from the pier. As they disappear into the crowd, he makes his way to his cabin and then, once settled, explores the ship. He meets a young piano player working with a band in first class who suggests that he cross the class barrier and come to listen to him play. At dinner that first night, the author finds himself at a table with four young women traveling to Germany to be with their husbands, and charms them with his wit and later, in the bar, with his own piano playing. He is disappointed, however, when they go to bed early. After spending the next day lounging on deck, the author dresses up and goes to first class, where he hears his friend the piano player who, on a break between sets, coaches him on how to play, and encounters a woman who wants him to join her and her daughter. He blurts out that he's not a first class passenger and the bewildered but still friendly woman goes back to her daughter. That night, as he climbs into his berth, he is surprised to find a telegram from his mother, signed "Mom", wishing him well. He crumples the telegram and, as he comments in narration, forgets about it. He spends the rest of the voyage seasick in his berth, only emerging the day before he is due to disembark. He watches as the girls from the dining room eagerly reunite with their husbands, one of them with "her whole body strained with longing". When it comes his turn to disembark, he moves "down the long, covered gangway toward the square of light in the distance".

In chapter eighteen, the author narrates a series of events that took place during his year of attendance at The International Folk High School of Elsinore in Denmark. He describes, among other things, his friendship with the French students (he is the only American) and their creation of an energetic, entertaining game called Hysteria. He also describes the beginnings of his relationship with a restrained Swedish girl named Christina, whose reluctance to be separated from him over the Christmas vacation turns into a near-hysterical obsession when they return that led him to keep his distance. He comments on his academic over-confidence, particularly when it comes to writing entrance exams for college, and his growing insight into the shallow thoughtlessness of his mother who, he learns, is divorcing Jean. He also describes a sexy encounter with a "spoiled, pouty, incredibly sexy sixteen year old Danish girl" over Christmas vacation. Finally, he writes that in the spring he went to Paris, having manipulated his mother into sending him the entire amount of the monthly allowance allocated to him by his trust fund. She had, he writes, been holding some of it back in order to help provide for him when he came home.

In the short chapter nineteen, the author describes his brief stay in Paris—his barely furnished room, his morning routine, his few friends, and his relationship with Alison who, the author writes, had a reaction to his bald spot that seemed "out of proportion" to the situation. He also describes the relative calmness with which he received the news that he had been accepted unconditionally at Haverford College. As he prepares to

leave, he is given a drawing by his artist friend John, an abstraction of "the lock on the Metro door". At the conclusion of the chapter, the author describes the calm eagerness with which he prepares to leave.

The author's "coming of age" continues in this section as the result of several specific events. In this context, important events include encounter with the young women in the bar, in which the author is treated like a young man, not a child, and the telegram from his mother, in which he is treated like a child, not a young man. There are also his communications with Dagmar about the trust, in which he treats his mother with childlike selfishness and mature, calculated manipulation. Then there is his academic and emotional education at Elsinore, full of more mature male-to-male competition and bonding, and more adult sexual and/or emotional relations with the opposite sex. Finally there is his acceptance into university, often regarded as a particularly potent symbol of coming of age and/or maturity.

A related noteworthy element is the image at the end of chapter seventeen, the "long, covered gangway toward the square of light in the distance" which carries with it associations of birth; specifically, the journey down the dark birth canal towards the "light" and life outside the womb. The implication here is that after a lifelong period of being in the darkness (i.e., life with Jean and Dagmar), with his move to Europe, the author is moving into a period of enlightenment, of growth, of truth and of meaning.

Another important image is that contained in the title of chapter nineteen, "The Lock on the Metro Door," and the drawing denoted by that title. There is the sense here that in focusing on, and recognizing the importance of, a version/vision of life as defined by an artist, and by doing so at the conclusion of a literal journey, the author is making a clear thematic statement. Without saying so explicitly, he makes the point that over the course of his coming of age, he has concluded that he too, as an artist and as an individual, can define life on his own terms. Here again the reader can see, as has been possible to do throughout the narrative, the author recalling and portraying events in his life with the intent of giving both the events and the life a sense of meaning, a sense of story.

Chapter 20, Epilogue

Chapter 20, Epilogue Summary and Analysis

In chapter twenty, the author describes how, back at home, very little had changed, a situation made complicated by the fact that he had changed, specifically referring to his view of his acceptance at Haverford as a profound opportunity. Meanwhile, Alison unexpectedly returns home, showing signs of some kind of mental disorder. Soon, however, she recovers, but has become clingy and needy, all too eager to accept a proposal of marriage from Jack. The author then describes the circumstances of his starting college. Jean had started a used car lot in Florida, Alison was to marry Jack, and his mother and Jessica would continue at the apartment in New York. The trustee, meanwhile, was paying his tuition and an allowance. "I was rich and I was free." Finally, he describes his friendly, welcoming arrival in Haverford.

In the epilogue, the author sets the scene as "About ten years later. England. 4:30 A.M." He is evidently on one of his drunken rides back from London. He describes how, as he's pulling into the town square, the rear wheels of his car fall off and he has a near-collision with the fountain in the centre of the square. The collision doesn't happen, however, and as he recovers from the shock, a voice cries out. "Here. What's all this?" And, then, the author writes, he "started to laugh".

The title of chapter twenty, "Unambiguous Events", says it all. The author, at this point in his life and in this narrative of that life, has arrived at a place where the greater meaning of events and circumstances is clear—the time has come for him, and the rest of his family, to move into a new phase of life. He develops this idea even further in his detailed description of his welcome at his new school, Haverford, a sequence that on a deeper level is symbolic of his being welcomed into his new life.

The epilogue, meanwhile, puts the final touch on the shape, on the perspective, and on the secondary thematic intent of the author's story, as lived and as narrated. Here, as in the prologue, he portrays himself and his life as being shaped by randomness and anarchy, by the unwittingly philosophical question posed by the bystander, "What's all this?", and by the helpless sense of humor when faced with the reminder of the all-too-human, all-too-unpredictable absurdities of the people, circumstance, and feeling (including the self-generated) that he has survived.

Characters

The Author (Frank Conroy)

Frank Conroy is a writer—a novelist and memoirist—and musician. Stop-time is his autobiographical recollection of his childhood and adolescence, his experiences of beginning to grow from childhood into adulthood. He portrays himself throughout this memoir as something of a risk taker and a rule breaker, always searching for independence from his family and their various oppressions. This sometimes comes across as selfishness, and there are times when the author, as self-portrayed by the adult version, is somewhat unsympathetic. Overall, however, the author seems to be generous enough of spirit and perspective to treat his selfishness with a compassion that only occasionally veers into the sentimental.

An important quality to note about the book is that in his childhood as he portrays it, the author doesn't seem to know that what he's doing is following a pattern, living a life of independence. As the adult author, however, he seems to have gained the insight that actively searching for independence was exactly what he was doing. In other words, this author's memoir does what all good memoirs do; that is, memoirs that go beyond a mere cataloguing of events. In Stop-time, Frank Conroy turns his life into a story, creating a sense of meaning and interrelation between event, circumstance and feeling that, in living in the moment, may not have been apparent or conscious, and probably wasn't. And in telling that story, he is essentially inviting the reader to recall and/or consider events in their own lives for the meaning and interrelationships that they might be able to find ... and learn from, as he seems to have learned from his.

Dagmar

Dagmar is the author's mother, an immigrant from Denmark. She was "a foreigner without friends or family," the author writes. "She had watched one life collapse, and where a weaker woman might have given up, she reorganized with the idea of building herself another." This "building", as the author portrays it, includes becoming involved with another man, Jean, shortly after the death of her first husband, enduring Jean's many attempts at making a quick and relatively easy living, and finally leaving the relationship when it becomes clear that he was never going to give her the kind of life she wanted. Interestingly, however, in all of this, the book does not evoke a clear picture of who Dagmar is. For the most part, she goes along with Jean's ride and is portrayed as a fairly distant and uninvolved mother. Later in the narrative, when the author is into the perhaps stereotypical rebellions of adolescence, he describes her as "shallow" and appears to be almost desperately eager to be away from her. It seems, in some ways, like a harsh judgment, although the trigger for that judgment does appear to be both manipulative and greedy. Reading between the lines, which at times seem more agenda driven than fully objective, it becomes possible for the reader to see Dagmar as a woman simply struggling to do the best she can in very difficult circumstances.

Jean

Jean, as noted above, is Dagmar's second husband and the primary father figure in the author's young life. Flighty, impulsive, relatively uneducated and a self-victimizer, Jean is what is often described as a "ne-er do-well", someone who, in spite of what they believe to be their best efforts, never seems to get ahead. In other words, Jean is something of a self-sabotager, or at least that's how the author portrays him. Jean does, at times, appear to make an effort to be a good and responsible father figure, but the author consistently portrays him as being afflicted with poor judgment, hapless and ineffectual.

The Author's Father, Alison, Minnie, Victor, Lucky, Jessica

These members of the author's family, both biological and step, play glimpsed but nevertheless important roles in the narrative. The author's father is portrayed as mentally unwell but perhaps a source of the author's restless search for independence, while Alison, the author's full sister, is initially portrayed as strong and responsible, but eventually as deteriorating into the same sort of mental illness as her father. Minnie is the author's grandmother, also portrayed as being mentally unwell. Victor is Jean's brother and Lucky is Victor's son, making them the author's step-uncle and step-cousin, respectively. Victor is an intimidating and volatile but distant presence in the author's life, while Lucky leads the author into his first experience of sex. Finally, Jessica is the author's half sister, born to Dagmar with Lucky as her father. She isn't portrayed as a character so much as an influence, an idealized trigger for what seems to be the author's first experience of genuine, compassionate love.

Teddy, Liggett, Herbie, Sammy, Earl, Peabody

These are all students at the author's first school, the Freemont (Experimental) Boarding School. They are participants in what the author portrays as one of the most powerful and important experiences of his childhood—the "trial" and punishment of "fat boy" Liggett for perceived racism.

The Rawlings Family

Tobey Rawlings is the author's best friend when he's in Florida, with the two of them exploring both the geographical and emotional wilds of youth. The author describes one encounter with Tobey's family, a moving story of free and playful joy that, in an instant, turns sour. Later in the narrative, the author describes his disillusionment when he re-encounters Tobey as an adolescent. That disillusionment, the almost archetypal discovery that childhood friendships don't always last, the narrative seems to be suggesting, is an important component of the author's "coming of age".

Donald, Nell Smith

Donald and Nell are the most noteworthy of what the author suggests is a string of boarders in the New York home of the author's family. Both, interestingly enough, are portrayed quite negatively, with Donald's devotion to Dagmar leading him to simultaneous hatred and mistreatment of Jean. When the manipulative Nell appears on the scene, charitably taken into the home by Jean, it's not hard to get the impression, which the author, incidentally, does not seem to be aware of, that Jean is engaging in a form of revenge on Dagmar. In other words, Dagmar brought in the hateful Donald, who tortured Jean. It may be that, on some level, Jean decides to bring in the hateful Nell to torture Dagmar.

Ramos and Ricardo

Ramos and Ricardo appear as a pair of mysterious visitors to the author's Florida home town. They introduce him to and train him in his final childhood obsession—manipulation of a yo-yo, in which they are showy experts. Their contribution to the author's life and growth is significant in that the yo-yo is, as the author himself points out, the first and among the most important element of his childhood to go by the wayside when he becomes more interested in the more adolescent pastime of sexual fantasy.

Sid, Jimmy, Willie

These are the author's co-workers at the Electro Research Plant. Strong willed boss Willie, disciplined ex-con Jimmy and brawny salesman Sid at first indulge the author's playfulness and lack of apparent work ethic, but after a while they draw the line and, by both firing him and not backing down on their decision, teach him the value of both work and respect.

Christina

At the boarding school attended by the author in Denmark, Christina is, like the author, a foreign student, visiting from Sweden. In the first, pre-Christmas term, their relationship is one of mutual interest and attraction. In the second term, however, the author portrays her as having become obsessed with him, to the point where he feels he has to back away from the once sexually promising relationship. There is the sense, never quite referred to explicitly, that as the result of a certain wariness that seems to have been the result of his relationship with Christina, the author begins to "come of age" when it comes to relationships with women in general.

Objects/Places

England

The book's prologue and epilogue are both set in England, where the author presents himself as having established a quiet, productive life occasionally interrupted by spasms of impulsive drinking.

Freemont School

The author's childhood school where he has an experience which, in the narrative's overall context, enlightens him about the dangers of indulging in childish impulses, a warning which, the narrative seems to suggest, he doesn't always listen to, since similar childish impulses, although less violent, nonetheless trigger trouble for both himself and others.

New York City

The author's original home to which he frequently returns after lengthy visits to Florida during his childhood, which becomes his permanent home once he enters adolescence, and through which he passes briefly on his way to a new life following his enlightening trip to Europe.

Fort Lauderdale

The author's Florida home, its apparently endless sunshine and frequent heat providing the backdrop for some of the author's most passionate childhood experiences.

The Dead Mule

The author and his childhood best friend Tobey discover the rotting body of a dead mule.

The Cabin in the Mountains

During winter visits back north in New York, the author's mother and step-father took jobs acting as night attendants in a mental hospital. The cold, badly constructed and uncomfortable cabin in the mountains, a trigger for all sorts of fears in the young author, was where they stayed on these weekends.

The Southbury Training School

The Southbury Training School is the name of the mental hospital in New York. The author's one-night visit to the school, made in an attempt to escape the terrors of the cabin, seems, in the author's narrative of his life, to be the occasion of his most profound experience of fear.

The Eighty-Sixth Street Apartment

The apartment of the author's family in New York is the setting for many important scenes in the narrative, the place where the author bases his life during his complicated, confrontational adolescence, and the place from which he eventually flees when that adolescence—combined with the absence of his mother and beloved half-sister—become too much to take.

Donald's

The tricks and games purchased by tenant Donald at a cheap store (a dribbling coffee cup, a non-dissolving sugar cube, a fake IQ test) and presented to Jean one Christmas are, in the author's writing, portrayed as Donald's means of humiliating Jean and the trigger for Jean's hatred of Donald. As a result, they become the trigger for the author's first experience of hate, which becomes another stage in his "coming of age".

The Ring Toss Game

The author travels with best friend Tobey and his family to a county fair where the author fairly wins a prize at a ring toss game, a prize taken from him by the operator of the game who then engages the author in inappropriate sexual activity. Here again, the author experiences components of the "coming of age" process—the discoveries that life is not always fair and that people can't always be trusted.

The Dog Pen

In Florida, the dog pen, a complicated structure of runs and shelters, is built by Jean to house the family's three dogs. It also becomes a kind of refuge for the author as he repeatedly attempts to take shelter from the storm of discontent that seems continually to rage between Jean and Dagmar.

Yo-Yos

As noted in relation to Ramos and Ricardo the author's childhood obsession with yo-yos, and with being the best at performing yo-yo tricks, is among the once-important parts of his childhood to be let go as he moves into adolescence.

Stuyvesant High School

This is the author's New York school, its multi-storied structure representing the multiple levels of what the author perceives as useless knowledge isolated from street-level life and reality.

The Electro Research Company

The author's high school job is working for the Electro Research Company, which is established in a rough part of town. Both the commute to work and the work itself provide him with valuable life lessons, the commute teaching him about the dark side of humanity and the work teaching him the value of a positive, productive work ethic.

The Ocean Liner to Europe

The author travels by boat to Europe, and in doing so takes a few more steps along his journey into young adulthood, his encounters with young, attractive, female fellow passengers among them. He also receives a telegram from his mother that triggers the initial stage of his disillusionment with her. Most of the trip, however, he is seasick and does nothing more than stay in his cabin and vomit.

The International Folk High School of Elsinore

This is the school attended by the author during his time in Europe. There is the sense, as he writes about his experiences there, that the academic education was less important than his education in relationships, friendship and romantic relationships alike.

It's interesting to note the point that Elsinore is also the setting for what is arguably one of the most famous plays in the world—William Shakespeare's "Hamlet". There is a sense of metaphorical link here; it could be argued that Hamlet the character comes of age over the course of the play that bears his name in the same way that significant moments in the author's coming of age take place at Elsinore.

Haverford College

The main body of the narrative concludes with the welcome the author receives at Haverford, where he begins what he contends is his "new life". In this sense, Haverford can be seen as metaphorically embodying both the end of his coming-of-age transformation from childhood to young adult, and the beginning of his transformation from young adult to maturity.

Themes

Coming of Age

This is the book's central theme, the focus of both its narrative and emotional through-line. The book is, essentially, the author's episodic recounting of contexts, relationships and incidents that contributed to his transformation from childhood to young adulthood, a transformation at the core of many similar narratives. "Coming of age" is, in other words, a universal or archetypal story, one familiar to everyone who has ever become an adult, or one who will become familiar to everyone who has yet to do so.

Within such archetypal stories, there are also archetypal experiences, many of which are encountered by the author in the pages of the book. These include the awareness of death, awareness of adult versions of emotions like hate, and the transfer of interest from childish, playful pastimes into more adolescent pastimes related to sex. The author also has the archetypal experiences of discovering the importance of work ethic, the first sexual encounter and losing illusions about one's parents.

It's interesting to note, meanwhile, that in drawing a clear narrative line and sense of meaning out of the events of his life the author has, consciously or not, created a symbolic parallel between the emotional journey from childhood into adolescence with the many physical journeys he experienced. This, in turn, defines the narrative's second major theme, travel as metaphor.

Travel as Metaphor

Throughout the narrative, the author portrays travel as a key component of his young life. As discussed above, this creates a parallel between the experience of mental/emotional journeys of transformation, from childhood to adolescence, and the experience of actual, physical journeys from place to place. These journeys include the trips between New York and Florida and the trip from New York to the cabin in the mountains, all of which can be seen as physical metaphors for the author's emotional journey into the heart of his family. Other important journeys include the young author's attempt to run away from home, which can be seen as an early, impulsive, unprepared and ultimately unsuccessful attempt to journey away from his old life and towards a new beginning.

The author's second attempt at a similarly intended journey, on a boat from New York to Europe, is in some ways more successful, in that the author actually reaches his destination. It's interesting to note, however, that the author spends most of this journey ill and vomiting in his cabin. There is the sense here that his illness might be perceived as either one final purging of the effects of his "old" life or as a manifestation of apprehension about his new one. It's also interesting to note that the journey back to New York is described in much less detail than the journey to Europe. There is the

sense, in fact, that the journey to New York is much less important than the subsequent journey to Haverford, where the author is to attend school. He is, in effect, taking one last trip through and essentially past his old life into a life and world that he, seemingly desperately, wants to experience as a new, much freer life. This, in turn, can be seen as a manifestation of the book's third main theme, the quest for independence.

Individual Independence

In broad strokes terms, the individual's search and striving for independence is perhaps central to the archetypal "coming-of-age" story. It's certainly central to the story told in Stop-Time, in which almost every incident reflects and/or manifests, in one way or another, the author's determination and desire to live an independent life. This core aspect of both his personality and his story is evident from the prologue to the epilogue, in which his drunken adventures in and out of London can be seen as a surge of independence from his admittedly comfortable, safe life, and in every chapter in between. His childhood adventures with Tobey, his adolescent schooldays, his running away from home, his work relationships, his travel to Europe ... all can be seen as attempts made by the author, either consciously or unconsciously, to claim his own identity and be independent.

This striving for individuality is, in no small way, an important component of every human experience. We all, in our own ways and at our own times, strive and struggle to be independent - of parents, of restrictive responsibilities to society and to others, of ideas and belief systems. In other words, we all want to be free, autonomous, and responsible for ourselves, even if that means choosing to be irresponsible, as the author sometimes is. This, in turn, means that the author's story, his struggle for independence and his growing into adulthood, is every person's story. The only differences are in the details.

Style

Perspective

The author, as previously discussed, is shaping a story out of the events of his own life. As such, he is uniquely qualified to tell this story—no one else has the lived, considered perspective on his life that he does. Although a more objective narrator might be able to provide a clearer, perhaps even more accurate version of the facts of his life, it is the author's interpretation of those facts, and of the feelings associated with them, that makes this narrative a story. Otherwise, it would be a diary.

That said, there is the strong sense about the book that it would appeal more to men who would, because the author is a man, come to the project with the same sort of perspective. The point is not made to suggest that it is a "men only" sort of book, but rather that several of the author's experiences are uniquely of the male archetype. Whether the author intended this is unknown, but the fact remains that while women also move from childhood to adolescence and while women also experience, for example, encounters with death, sexuality, love and loss, there is a very masculine sensibility to the book and its perspectives.

Ultimately, the impact of this memoir, as is the case with memoirs in general, is to awaken in the reader a broader sense of what it means to be a human being. There is also, perhaps, that memoir exists, in its broadest parameters, to remind people that when it comes to each individual life, there is always more to the person and what they've lived and been through than what is immediately apparent.

Tone

Because it is an autobiography and because it is therefore narrated in the first person voice, the book is an entirely subjective piece. At times the author seems to be making at least an attempt at objectivity, but for the most part, that objectivity is undermined by the clearly personal, subjective commentary. That said, there is at times almost a tone of melancholy or of sadness about the stories and the way they're told, almost a sense of regret that events happened in the way they did. This is particularly true when the author is writing about loss—his loss of faith in the durability of friendship, as is evident in his narration of his visit to the much older Tobey and the loss of his idealization of adult behavior. There is, however, no real sense of loss that emerges from his commentary on his loss of feeling for his mother. The feeling here is one of bitterness and resentment, a powerful subtext that might very well make the reader want to know what the relationship became. The glimpses of Dagmar in the final chapters are so brief, it's difficult to get a sense of how the mother/son relationship got past the son's disillusion, or indeed if it ever did.

Meanwhile, a very interesting aspect of the book's tone is how the author uses shifts from past to present tense to create a sense of emotional immediacy and/or intensity. There is the sense at these points in the narrative that he is, in effect, saying to the reader that the points he is describing are key, pivotal, and central to his experience both of his past and his present. In other words, the shift of tense suggests that these particular events of the past were significantly important in defining his present.

Structure

With the exception of the prologue and epilogue, and one brief internal diversion in chapter twelve, the book's structure is essentially linear, following the author through a series of encounters and events from childhood through adolescence into young adulthood. This contributes strongly to the narrative sensibility anchoring the book - that a life has become a story, that what happened in the past, often with "in-the-moment" spontaneity, has been examined and ordered and written about with an eye to creating meaning. In other words, structure in this case is an essential component of thematic and narrative purpose.

Within that basic structure, however, there are points at which the linear recounting of events widens somewhat to include the author's perspective on the events he describes. He is in many ways taking detours off the main biographical road in order to give the reader a broader insight and deeper context into the meaning and circumstances of the events he's describing. Widening perspective is, in both literary and experiential terms, an effective way of broadening insight personal, emotional, and spiritual insight, for those both writing about and reading stories of all sorts, and especially biographical stories such as this one. This means that ultimately, the combination of linear structure diverted occasionally into reflective side studies of character, relationship and feeling serves to bring the reader more fully and effectively into the writer's world. Further, because many of the author's experiences are archetypal in principle—although perhaps not in specifics—the book can be seen as a reference point for people making a journey into the world of their own lives.

Quotes

"The drive home was the point of it all ... fifty to sixty miles an hour through the empty streets of South London ... slamming in the gears, accelerating on every turn ... my brain finally clean and white, washed out by the danger and the roar of the wind ... in the few villages along the way I pulled every trick I could think of to make up for the slower speeds ... to maintain the speed and streak through the dark world." Prologue

"...above all, filtering down through the whole school, the excitement of the 'new thing', of the experiment - that peculiar floating sensation of not knowing what's going to happen next." p. 13

"Although Ligget's beating is part of my life ... and although I've worried about it off and on for years, all I can say about it is that brutality happens easily. I learned almost nothing from beating up Ligget ... it wasn't hurting Ligget that was important, but rather the unbelievable opportunity to throw a clean, powerful punch completely unhindered, and with none of the sloppiness of an actual fight." p. 19

"Perhaps children remember only waiting for things. The moment events begin to occur they lose themselves in movement." p. 22

"The view in all directions was exactly the same. Flat, sandy land, underbrush, and stunted pine trees. Dismal, to say the least. We bought two lots." p. 25

"Death dramatized, something of unbelievable importance being revealed right in front of us. But something else too...we sensed the forces around us but they were too thinly spread, too finely drawn over all the miles of woods for us to grasp them ... when we found the dead mule we knew we were close ... those forces ... had converged here, on this animal the moment he died, and were not yet altogether gone." p. 29

"Jean ... dropped from nowhere to become my father. I emerged from behind my mother's skirts looking, to his eyes, something like a son. We had in common that we were male inhabitants of the U.S.A., and my mother, and nothing more ... we faced each other like two strangers trapped in an elevator." p. 31.

"Spread-eagled over the deck of the car, sinking back into a sleep from which no more than sixty seconds ago I had awakened ... it came to me that the world was insane. Not just people. The world." p. 33

"Suddenly I know that Alison is only acting. She plays it out as if we were ordinary grandchildren visiting an ordinary grandmother, as if we were the sort of people Alison had read about in the magazines." p. 40

"It was as if all the saints, martyrs and mystics of human history were gathered into a single building, each one crying out at the moment of revelation, each one truly THERE at his extreme of joy or pain, crying out with the purity of total selflessness." p. 56

"The days were emptiness, a vast, spacious emptiness in which the fact of being alive became almost meaningless. The first fragile beginnings of a personality starting to collect in my twelve year old soul were immediately sucked up into the silence and the featureless winter sky." p. 61

"While I passed through the attenuated agonies of growing up ... there were boys next door who were never going to grow up at all, boys who would starve to death without someone to feed them." p. 62

"With only the sleeping children in the house they spent their evenings at woman talk, comparing notes on life, men, and the price of eggs, quietly and unhurriedly talking themselves into calmness, as if time would never run out." p. 65

"[Donald] lived vicariously in her laughter, liking the warmth in her voice, liking the sudden and complete reduction of his own lonely and painful life into her all-encompassing, simple, unknowing laugh. She was it seems clear, a mother to him." p. 68

"For a fraction of a second there was silence, and in that small full instant I changed, I aged. I understood hate for the first time ... hate was in the room, the air heavy with it, Donald's hatred for Jean, and my own instantaneously blind and bottomless hatred for Donald." p. 74

"Can they have understood, as each approached a lonely old age, that they had denied each other's reality ... as if life were no more than a cycle of their separate fantasies, as if there were all the time in the world." p. 75

"The quietest thirteen year old boy in the world is the boy who finds a raving, half-blind, red-necked, out-of-work hillbilly housepainter between himself and the door." p. 85

"Landscape we had raced through, singing songs, laughing on our way to the quarry, the guava tree, or the deserted shack - the same landscape now struck straight through to my heart ... it was the simple existence of the woods that scared me, the fact that it was all there, other than me, and much stronger than me." p. 97

"An adult recognizes petty problems for what they are and transcends them through his higher preoccupations, his goals - he moves on, as it were. A child has no choice but to accept the immediate experiences of his life at face value. He isn't moving on, he simply is." p. 98

"The discovery that the dogs, like humans, could not be taken for granted was hard for me." p. 105

"I spent the whole afternoon in one spot, watching them, not even moving when they took breaks for fear I'd lose my place ... I spent my last money on a yo-yo ... and a pamphlet explaining all the tricks ... I knew I was going to be good at it." p. 109

"I never called [Lucky] on his white lies. Lucky was always in rehearsal for great, unspecified trials ahead. I liked him." p. 118.

"...to be there with her, to hold her and have her like it because I was a man, to learn the mystery from her, to die inside her would be, in no uncertain terms, the best possible thing that could happen. Literally heaven on earth. Even the thought made my hands tremble." p. 120

"It's not entirely impossible that my father in law's mysterious reluctance to receive me into the bosom of his family was related to a buried image of myself with a thumb on the scales, under his bananas." p. 131

"Approaching, he'd been a policeman, and now, retreating, he was just a man dressed in blue. The transformation stunned me. I couldn't have been more astonished if he'd disappeared in thin air." p. 134

"I read four or five hours every night at home, but it was never quite as sweet as in school, when even a snatch read as I climbed the stairs seemed to protect me from my surroundings with an efficacy that bordered on the magical." p. 143

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"The way the stringy muscles sagged ever so slightly under the skin, the fishy whiteness of her, the quick birdlike nervousness of every move - she was thin soup when one wanted stew ... she prettied herself with much the same air of dazed inattention as my mother washed dishes, not for pleasure but because it had to be done." p. 161.

"Jean emptied his bag of verbal tricks once more. All the techniques grown stale with my mother were fresh again, gambits that she had learned to see through or ignore worked anew ... the chance to pour word-magic into fresh and captive ear[s] satisfies a need as deep as sex. His delight in himself was reborn." p. 167

"Thus works the mind of a child, always a bit behind the world, swamped with emotion, and innocent of its own cunning." p. 186

"Dazed by the sweetness of surrender, I left everything behind me without a thought, all of it forever behind me, falling away, more and more distant with every stride, falling away, falling away, falling away." p. 192

"[Dagmar] never forgave [Jean's] peccadillo and as a result finally completed the retreat into female strength and self-sufficiency with which she'd always threatened him." p. 197

"Deep inside me gates were closing, one by one, locking up a vital area I couldn't afford to lose all at once, sealing my love in private darkness." p. 203

"The real world dissolved and I was free to drift in fantasy, living a thousand lives, each one more powerful, more accessible, and more real than my own. It was around this time that I first thought of becoming a writer. In a cheap novel the hero was asked his profession ... 'I'm a novelist,' he said, and I remember ... thinking my God, what a beautiful thing to be able to say." p. 230

"The signature ['Mom'] was particularly out of character. All my life I'd called her Mother, never Mom ... it seemed spurious somehow ..." p. 246.

"...I'd found out what I wanted to know. French, which I'd failed three times in high school, was in fact a real language, spoken by real people. Europe existed." p. 248.

"Thousands of miles away from her I discovered she unconsciously accepted her limitations, confining her written statements to a level of almost childish simplicity ... her letters were peculiarly dead - dead with all the outward signs of life, like stillborn infants." p. 262

"I stopped, posed above her, listening to the world within and the world without, waiting for a sign, my soul suspended like an orator caught in a photograph ... forever about to speak ... some part of me was afraid in the midst of my desire, afraid without my knowing it." p. 266

"In a single moment I understood distortion in art ... what he had drawn was the process ... he had captured movement in a static drawing ..." p. 276

"My acceptance into a good college meant I could destroy my past. It seemed to me to amount to an ORDER to destroy my past, a past I didn't understand, a past I feared, and a past with which I had expected to be forever encumbered." p. 278

"I was going to die. As the fountain grew larger I felt myself relax. I leaned toward the door. Let it come. Let it come as hard and as fast as it can ... here it comes! HERE IT COMES!" Epilogue

Topics for Discussion

What do you think is the connection between the title of chapter one, "Savages", and the stories it contains?

When you consider the concept of "coming of age", what events in your life do you think contributed or contribute to your coming of age?

Do you think the author's tears, as described at the end of chapter five, really are irrelevant? Either way, explain why or why not.

What would you say are the metaphorical meanings associated with the title of chapter seven, "Shit", the author's detailed attention to the ritual/chore of cleaning up dog excrement, and his dreamed/waking experiences with the dogs?

Also in regards to chapter seven, what do you think are the metaphorical parallels between the author's circumstances and those of the dogs?

What do you think are the metaphorical meanings of the title of chapter eleven, "Blindman's Buff"? Consider the relationship between the title and all the major characters of the chapter—the author, Jean, Dagmar, and Nell.

At the end of chapter thirteen, following his outburst of emotional self-abuse, the author tells his mother he was at a funeral. The metaphorical implications of this is that for the author, something has died. What do you think this might be?

What is your opinion of the author's choices, made as the result of his determination to keep his job at the Electro Research Company? Was he justified in lying to his potential replacement? Why or why not?

What are the metaphorical values associated with the many journeys taken by the author ... between Florida and New York, the attempt at running away, the voyage to Europe? In what ways do those journeys relate to the book's central theme of "coming of age"?

Do you think it's possible to write a completely objective memoir? Why or why not?

Looking back on your life to this point, what sense of meaning can you discern emerging from your individual experiences? What is the "story" of your life, as opposed to a list of what happened "during" your life?